

# HOW THEN SHOULD WE WORK?

Rediscovering the Biblical Doctrine of Work



Hugh Welchel

May 29, 2009

# Rediscovering the Biblical Doctrine of Work

“Christians must revive a centuries-old view of humankind as made in the image of God, the eternal Craftsman, and of work as a source of fulfillment and blessing not as a necessary drudgery to be undergone for the purpose of making money, but as a way of life in which the nature of man should find its proper exercise and delight and so fulfill itself to the glory of God. That it should, in fact, be thought of as a creative activity undertaken for the love of the work itself; and that man, made in God’s image, should make things, as God makes them, for the sake of doing well a thing that is well worth doing.”<sup>1</sup>

Dorothy L. Sayers

## Introduction

The arena was packed with over 5,000 business people attending a one day motivational conference to listen to some of today’s greatest inspirational speakers including, General Colin Powell, Dick Vitale and Tony Robbins. One of the speakers began by asking the following question, “If you went home tonight and found that a long lost relative had died and left you \$10,000,000 would you be at work tomorrow?” An audible “NO” rang out from the audience. Their sentiment is shared by many in our country today. A recent Gallup poll found that 77% of Americans hate their jobs. Another found Americans hate their jobs more today than in the past 20 years; fewer than half say they’re satisfied with their current job.<sup>2</sup> With 50-hour plus work weeks and long commutes, workers are spending more and more of their lives at work, yet so many of them are unfulfilled and frustrated with their jobs.

This is also true for many Christians for whom work often seems only a “means to an end.” Christians today have bought into the pagan notion that leisure is good and work is bad. They have also been misled by the sacred/secular distinction which teaches that only working in the church is “real” fulltime Christian service. This has not always been the case. The Reformers taught that all labor accepted as a calling and performed “as unto the Lord” was noble, yet this truth has slipped dramatically both in today’s Church and our present culture. Paul Helm in his book *The Callings: The Gospel in the World*, suggests, “Work is part of a Christian’s calling...this biblical idea has had a profound influence in Europe and North America since the Reformation but has largely been forgotten, due to the eclipse of the influence of the Christian

---

<sup>1</sup>Dorothy Sayers, *Creed or Chaos?* (Manchester, NH: Sophia Institute Press, 1974), 89.

<sup>2</sup>Lisa Cullen, *Time Magazine*, “Three Signs of a Miserable Job,” August 21, 2007  
[http://workinprogress.blogs.time.com/2007/08/21/three\\_signs\\_of\\_a\\_miserable\\_job/](http://workinprogress.blogs.time.com/2007/08/21/three_signs_of_a_miserable_job/).

gospel from national life.”<sup>3</sup> As followers of Christ, we must address our failure to live as His followers in the workplace and to think theologically about how we integrate our faith and our work. We must learn not to work just to live, but to live to work for the glory of God.

The purpose of this paper is to first, try to understand how the church has wandered so far from the biblical truth of vocational calling second, define the biblical principle of all work as calling and to finally, offer some direction for rediscovering this lost doctrine of work.

## **The Problem**

Os Guinness in his book *The Call* says, “...calling is the truth that God calls us to himself so decisively that everything we are, everything we do and everything we have is invested with a special devotion and dynamism lived out as a response to his summons and service.”<sup>4</sup> This primary calling to “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind”<sup>5</sup> is clearly articulated by Jesus as he quotes Deuteronomy 6:5 when he is asked which is the greatest commandment in the Law? Guinness goes on to explain that there is a difference between this primary and our secondary calling: “Our primary calling as followers of Christ is by Him, to Him, and for Him.... Our secondary calling, considering who God is as sovereign, is that everyone, everywhere, and in everything should think, speak, live, and act entirely for Him.” Guinness maintains we must ensure that our primary calling leads, without fail to our secondary calling. We need to clearly see the difference between this “primary” call of God “to be” and the “secondary” call “to do” by fully integrating God’s call into all areas of our life. For the followers of Christ, this secondary calling should lead them to find their unique “life purpose,” in order to use their particular gifts and abilities to their utmost for God’s glory. Guinness concludes that in our day “this holistic character of calling has often been distorted to become a form of dualism that elevates the spiritual at the expense of the secular.”<sup>6</sup>

It is true that this doctrine of calling has fallen on hard times in the present postmodern world. Even people in the church speak of their “religious preferences” and “spiritual lifestyles” instead of their God-ordained duties, responsibilities, and privileges. Even though all evangelical Christians today would acknowledge that all of life is to be lived under the comprehensive Lordship of Christ,<sup>7</sup> few understand that even in our everyday work, the scripture teaches no separation between the secular and the sacred. There is no church-

---

<sup>3</sup> Paul Helm, *The Callings: The Gospel in the World* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1987), 98-99.

<sup>4</sup> Os Guinness, *The Call, Finding and Fulfilling the Central Purpose of Your Life* (Nashville, TN: W Publishing Group, 1998), 4.

<sup>5</sup> Matthew 22:36.

<sup>6</sup> Guinness, *Call*, 31.

<sup>7</sup> Matthew 28:18.

related work or missions which is more spiritual than other professions such as law, business, education, journalism, or politics. All of our actions should be unified in obedience to God and for God's glory.<sup>8</sup> The Kingdom of God bears on every dimension of life, and agents of that Kingdom serve as salt and light wherever the Spirit leads them. As Christians live out their world view in public life, they help reverse the erosion of truth in a number of different ways. In the midst of the fragmentation of postmodern pluralism, Christians should see all things as unified in God's over-arching plan for the universe, summed up in the supremacy of Christ and his full calling on our lives. Abraham Kuyper, the great Dutch statesman, theologian, and journalist made the famous statement that there is no square inch of territory in the whole universe over which Christ does not say "this is mine."<sup>9</sup>

Dorothy Sayers wrote extensively about this problem in England after the First World War. In light of where we are in the Church today, her writing seems almost prophetic:

"In nothing has the Church so lost Her hold on reality as in Her failure to understand and respect the secular vocation. She has allowed work and religion to become separate departments, and is astonished to find that, as a result, the secular works is turned to purely selfish and destructive ends, and that the greater part of the world's intelligent workers have become irreligious, or at least, uninterested in religion. But is it astonishing? How can anyone remain interested in a religion that seems to have no concern with nineteenth of his life? The Church's approach to an intelligent carpenter is usually confined to exhorting him not to be drunk and disorderly on Sundays. What the Church should be telling him is this: that the very first demand that his religion makes upon him is that he should make good tables."<sup>10</sup>

Michael P. Schutt in his book *Redeeming Law* speaks to this issue as he remembers his own experience as a young Christian lawyer trying to understand how to integrate his faith and his work. "We wanted to be more than Christians muddling through the law. We wanted to be Christian lawyers, our faith integrated with our calling. We found little guidance in the classroom, from our texts, or from practicing lawyers and professors. Or from our pastors and priests."<sup>11</sup> As Christians, we need to understand that our call to be salt and light in the world<sup>12</sup> requires us not only to understand the dominant cultural forces that are shaping our

---

<sup>8</sup> 1 Cor 10:31; Col 3:17.

<sup>9</sup> Abraham Kuyper *Lectures on Calvinism* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing. Company, 1931)

<sup>10</sup> Sayers, *Creed*, 106.

<sup>11</sup> Michael P. Schutt, *Redeeming Law, Christian Calling and the Legal Profession*, (Downers Grove, IL, Intervarsity Press, 2007), 15.

<sup>12</sup> Matthew 5:13-16.

environment but also how to use both our primary and secondary callings to positively impact God's Kingdom. The Church needs to be teaching lawyers, doctors, construction workers, or mothers homeschooling their children how to carry out their vocational calling from a truly Christian perspective.

Carl F. H. Henry in his book *Aspects of Christian Social Ethics* begins to show us a way out of this current dilemma: "According to the scriptural perspective, work becomes a way-station of spiritual witness and service, a daily traveled bridge between theology and social ethics. In other words, work for the believer is a sacred stewardship, and in fulfilling his job he will either accredit or violate the Christian witness."<sup>13</sup> Christians need to see that the Church can and should think differently from everyone else in our culture about all aspects of life, especially work. In celebrating human creativity as evidence of our being made in the Creator's likeness, Christians must encourage one another to do work worthy of our best efforts, worthy of our calling. We must challenge one another as Christians to seek "the kingdom of a divine understanding of work"<sup>14</sup> which gives us a mysterious and glorious view of vocation.

### **How did we get here?**

Why does the church currently have such a distorted view of work? If we look back over the last 2000 years of Christian history, we see the idea of vocation has been understood quite differently at different times. In the years prior to the Christian era, we find two sharply contrasting views of everyday work among the Greeks and the Jews.

In the Greek world, manual work was considered to be a curse. Aristotle said that to be unemployed was good fortune because it allowed a person to participate in the life of contemplation. In Book X of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle argued that the contemplative life is the happiest life for a human being.<sup>15</sup> For the Greeks, society was organized so that a few could enjoy the blessing of "leisure" while work was done by those in lower social-economic positions and slaves. Everyday work was demeaning and something one should try to avoid. Certainly there was nothing spiritually meaningful or uplifting about everyday work.<sup>16</sup>

The opportunity to think about issues and engage in contemplation was also greatly valued by Jews, yet they held a very different view of work. The Old Testament placed a high value on work, even menial labor, therefore the Jews saw work as part of God's purposes in creation.

---

<sup>13</sup> Carl F. H. Henry, *Aspects of Christian , Social Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), 31.

<sup>14</sup> Dorothy L. Sayers, "Vocation in Work," in *A Christian Basis for the Post-War World*, edited by A. E. Baker (London: Christian Student Movement Press, 1942), 99 .

<sup>15</sup> Aristotle *Nicomachean Ethics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1925), 261.

<sup>16</sup> Paul Marshall. *A Kind of Life Imposed on Man: Vocation and Social Order from Tyndale to Locke*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996), 21-22.

Theological reflection would be employed by people who were daily engaged in everyday life in the world. In fact, it is very significant to note that Jewish teachers, unlike the Greeks of their day, were not expected to live off the contributions of their students, but were all expected to have a trade through which they could support themselves.

It is not surprising then to see the same appreciation of work in the first century Christian Church. In the New Testament, Jesus certainly gave no general call for all Christians to give up everyday work and much of his teaching drew on themes from the world of everyday work without any self-consciousness or apologies. Paul also emphasizes a positive view of work, commanding all Christians to continue in their work and to work well.<sup>17</sup> It is apparent from his own writings that he continued in his trade as a tentmaker during his church planting ministry. This would seem to be the general Christian pattern for the first century after the Apostles. In the New Testament Church, we see Christians giving glory to God in and through their occupations, doing the same jobs as unbelievers but performing them in a distinctly Christian way. In the second century work, *The Letter to Diognetus* we read, “What the soul is to the body that the Christians are to the world.”<sup>18</sup> These early believers lived the entirety of their lives differently and in so doing, invited their pagan neighbors, by word and witness, to consider the truth of the faith they proclaimed. They were truly salt and light in their culture which radically changed their world in the first few centuries after the death and resurrection of Christ.

By the end of the third century, the Church Fathers began to be more heavily influenced by Greek thought in their theology and the positive view of all work being God’s work began to slowly change. This is reflected in the writing of both Eusebius and Augustine. Eusebius writes in his doctrine of two contrasting ways to live, the “Perfect life” consisting of sacred vocations dedicated to contemplation (*vita contemplativa*) and reserved for priests, monks, nuns, etc. He compares it to the “Permitted life,” one of secular vocations dedicated to action (*vita activa*) and entailing such tasks as governing, farming, trading, soldiering and homemaking.<sup>19</sup> In a similar way, Augustine distinguished between the “active life” and the “contemplative life.” While both kinds of life were good, and Augustine had praise for the work of farmers, craftsmen and merchants, the contemplative life was of a higher order. At times it might be necessary to follow

---

<sup>17</sup> Col. 3:23-24, 1 Thessalonians 2:9, 1 Thessalonians 4:11-12.

<sup>18</sup> Letter to Diognetus, AD 125/200, in Jurgens, 1970: 41.

<sup>19</sup> Eusedios of Caesarea, *Demonstration of the Gospel* 1.8 ET in *The Proof of the Gospel Being the Demonstratio Evangelica of Eusebius of Caesarea*, vol 1, Trans. W.J. Ferrar (London: S.P.C.K.), 48-50.

the active life but, according to Augustine, wherever possible, one should choose the other: "The one life is loved, the other endured."<sup>20</sup>

This pattern produced a flawed argument that work had less value in God's Kingdom than contemplation and shaped much of subsequent Christian thinking regarding vocation until the Reformation. "And by the time Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire, the distinction between clergy and laity was fairly well established. With the establishment of celibacy for the clergy in the 11th century, this demarcation was complete and the laity were relegated to second-class status in the church."<sup>21</sup> This trend was also reinforced by the rise of a type of monastic spirituality which regarded vocation as a calling out of the world into the desert or the monastery. The division of calling into sacred and secular categories during the Middle Ages and the subsequent subordination of the laity to the professional priesthood marginalized the New Testament view of the priesthood of all believers, a point not lost on Martin Luther.

It was initially through the Luther's work that the 16th century reformers began to recover the biblical doctrine of work acknowledging that all of life, including daily work, could be understood as a calling from God. In *The Fabric of this World*, Lee Hardy summarizes Luther's position on calling by saying, "Vocation is the specific call to love one's neighbor." According to Luther, we respond to the call to love our neighbor by fulfilling the duties that are associated with our everyday work.<sup>22</sup> This work includes domestic and civic duties as well as our employment. In fact, Luther said we can only truly serve God in the midst of everyday circumstances and all attempts to elevate the significance of the contemplative life are false.<sup>23</sup>

Thirty years later, John Calvin develops an even more dynamic view of calling which encouraged a greater degree of urban enterprise and the possibility of changing vocations. Alister McGrath writes, "Theology for Calvin offered a framework for engaging with public life." Calvin taught that the individual believer has a vocation to serve God in the world-in every sphere of human existence-lending a new dignity and meaning to ordinary work.

Underlying this new attitude is the notion of the vocation or "calling." God calls his people, not just to faith, but to express that faith in quite definite areas of life.... Luther and Calvin regarded vocation as a calling into the everyday world. The idea of a calling or vocation is first and foremost about being called by God,

---

<sup>20</sup> Brian J. Walsh and Richard Middleton, *Transforming Vision: Shaping a Christian World View*(Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1984), 99.

<sup>21</sup> Henlee H Barnette, *Has God Called You?*, (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1965), 39-42.

<sup>22</sup> Lee Hardy, *The Fabric of This World: Inquiries into Calling, Career Choice, and the Design of Human Work*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1990), 46.

<sup>23</sup> Paul Althaus, *The Ethics of Martin Luther*, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1972), 39-40

to serve Him within his world. Work was thus seen as an activity by which Christians could deepen their faith, leading it on to new qualities of commitment to God. Activity within the world, motivated, informed, and sanctioned by Christian faith, was the supreme means by which the believer could demonstrate his or her commitment and thankfulness to God. To do anything for God, and to do it well, was the fundamental hallmark of authentic Christian faith. Diligence and dedication in one's everyday life are, Calvin thought, a proper response to God.<sup>24</sup>

Luther, Calvin and the other reformers sharply contrasted the monastic call "from the world" with the authentically Christian call "into the world." This "Reformed" view of work and calling was further developed by the Puritans who also encouraged enterprise and thrift with a strong ethic emphasizing the importance of stewardship and service. But this "Protestant Work Ethic" was soon to be overtaken by the Industrial Revolution.

By the end of the 18th century, two forces begin to emerge that would have a lasting effect on the theology of work in the western world: capitalism and Marxism. Many historians argue that it was the Protestant work ethic which ushered in the "spirit of capitalism" leading to the Industrial Revolution. While others suggest this historical shift resulted instead from the Protestant work ethic's corruption. Regardless, it is during this period when the concept of vocation became so closely associated with a person's occupation or career that these words became synonymous and all reference to the calling of God disappear. Both capitalism and Marxism see the pursuit of a vocation as an end in itself and encourage workers to look for personal fulfillment through the labor of their own hands. Whereas, once the medieval church threatened to divorce faith from work, now they are so closely fused that work has become an idol to which we look for our very identity.

What Marx promised the alienated workers of mid-19th century England was that the work of their hands mattered to history. While he profoundly misread the human heart, and countless heartaches came from his thesis, he did speak to a deep human longing, viz. that we all hunger for our work to matter. The sickle and the hammer, ordinary tools that they are, represent the hope that what one does day after day will affect history, that the world will be different because of what we do. We all want that, everyone everywhere.<sup>25</sup>

---

<sup>24</sup> Alister McGrath "Calvin and the Christian Calling" *First Things* 94 (June/July 1999): 31-35.

<sup>25</sup> Steve Garber, February 15, 2008 newsletter.

Neither capitalism nor Marxism could deliver on the promise to bring significant meaning to our work, which is why so few people, including Christians, find any satisfaction in their jobs.

Where does that leave us today? At the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century we are confronted by two great distortions regarding the purpose of our work which have erected a wall between personal faith and public work. Os Guinness calls these two “grand distortions”: the “Catholic Distortion,” which “elevates the spiritual at the expense of the secular and the “Protestant Distortion,” or the elevation of the secular at the expense of the sacred.<sup>26</sup> The example of the “Catholic Distortion,” that is most often heard is, “Did you hear that Joe Smith has left his job at the bank to go into full time Christian service as a pastor?” The “Protestant Distortion,” is a form of dualism in a secular direction that not only elevates the secular at the expense of the spiritual, but also cuts it off from the spiritual altogether. It takes work, a good thing, and turns it into an ultimate thing. The work no longer serves God but man instead. We either make work too important or not important enough. Simultaneously avoiding both distortions requires a successful integration of faith and work, an area in which today’s evangelical Church has fallen far short.

Many Christians today earnestly desire a deeper, more integrated approach to serving God in their work. They are looking for an approach that takes into account the Christian as a whole person, not a life that is compartmentalized, and divided by conflicting demands in different roles. They want to be men and women who serve God with heart, soul, and mind in every sphere of life, as husband or wife, parent, church member, employer, or employee. Yet they struggle to understand where to start and how to put all the pieces together.

The Reformers radically changed their world and its culture in a generation in part by bringing Christians back to the biblical understanding of work. As Christians today, we stand in a very similar position and must take seriously the idea of being salt and light in our world and living lives that make a difference. In order to take advantage of this opportunity to further the Kingdom, we must rediscover the biblical doctrine of work.

### **The Biblical Doctrine of Work**

The Bible has much to say about work which in its different forms is mentioned more than 800 times, more than all the words used to express worship, music, praise, and singing combined. “The Bible begins with the announcement, 'In the beginning God created...not sat majestic in the heavens. He created. He did something. He made something. He fashioned

---

<sup>26</sup> Guinness, *Call*, 31-32.

heaven and earth. The week of creation was a week of work.<sup>27</sup> From the very beginning of the scriptures we are faced with the inescapable conclusion that God himself is a worker. It is part of his character and nature. The opening two chapters of Genesis provide a foundation for God's view of work, culture and man's responsibility.

In Genesis 2:15 we read, "The LORD God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it." Man was created by God to work, to cultivate and keep God's creation, to prepare and protect it. We were created to be stewards of God's creation through our work. God assigned Adam and Eve important work prior to the Fall. Work is a gift from God and by it we employ useful skills to glorify God and love our neighbors. The Fall did not create work, but it did make it inevitable that work would sometimes be frustrating or seemingly meaningless.<sup>28</sup>

Adam's work in the garden can be seen as a metaphor for all of work. In the story of Creation, we see God bringing order out of chaos. A gardener does the same thing by creatively using the materials at his disposal, rearranging them to produce additional usable resources for mankind. A Gardner is not a Park Ranger, he does not leave things the way they are. Tim Keller offers the following simple definition for work, "Rearranging the raw materials of a particular domain to draw out its potential for the flourishing of everyone."<sup>29</sup> That is what Adam was called to do in the garden, which is what we are called to do in our work today.

These opening chapters in Genesis also contain what is generally called the "cultural mandate," God's instructions concerning our stewardship of His creation. Reformed Christians have traditionally understood Genesis 1:28 as the purpose and permission for engaging the world.

God blessed them and said to them, "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 on the ground."<sup>30</sup>

"The first human experience recorded in Scripture is the experience of hearing this command. This command governs everything Adam and Eve would do thereafter. It defines the very purpose of human life."<sup>31</sup> The mandate God gives Adam and Eve is to partner with him in his work. From the beginning, God is prepared to entrust the garden to man and for us to become his co-workers. In the creation narrative this is expressed in God's command to "fill the earth

---

<sup>27</sup> Eugene Peterson, *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction* (IVP: Downers Grove, 1980), 104.

<sup>28</sup> Geneses 3:15.

<sup>29</sup> Tim Keller, *Work*, (Redeemer Presbyterian Church, NYC, NY: 2007).

<sup>30</sup> Genesis 1:28.

<sup>31</sup> John Frame *Christianity and Culture*, Lectures given at the Pensacola Theological Institute, July 23-27, 2001.

and subdue it" and to "have dominion" over all living things. This stewardship role is a call for man to work with and for God. The implication seems to be that the value and significance of our work is directly related to how connected it is with God's work. When you use your gifts in work, whether by making clothes, practicing law, tilling the field, mending broken bodies, or nurturing children, you are participating in God's work. God does not only send ministers to give the world sermons, but doctors to give medicine, teachers to impart wisdom, and so on.<sup>32</sup> We see this not only in Genesis but through the entire narrative of redemptive history. That mandate, more properly called the "creation mandate" is of such foundational importance for the whole of scriptural history of revelation, and therefore for a biblical worldview, that we would do well to look more closely its wording."<sup>33</sup> Rightly understood, we are more than permitted to engage every part of the created order. We are, in fact, told by God himself that the created world is ours, given to us as a trust from God Himself. We are to engage it, announcing and exercising the presence and rule of Christ over every part of it. This includes the arts and the sciences, social justice and economics, the churches and U2 concerts, the *Passion of the Christ* and *Les Miserables*.

"Who formed the world of nature (which provides the raw material for physical sciences)? Who formed the universe of human interactions (which is the raw material of politics, economics, sociology, and history)? Who is the source of all harmony, form, and narrative pattern (which is the raw material for art?) Who is the source of the human mind (which is the raw material for philosophy and psychology?) And who, moment by moment, maintains the connection between our minds and the world beyond our minds? God did, God does."<sup>34</sup>

As the social critic Herbert Schlossberg says, "The 'salt' of people changed by the gospel must change the world."<sup>35</sup> To do this we must begin to truly understand the idea of vocation.

Unfortunately, today the words work, vocation, calling and job are used interchangeably. Our word vocation comes from the Latin *vocatio*, which means a summons or a calling. The Scripture is full of passages that describe how we have been called to faith through the Gospel<sup>36</sup> and how God calls us to a particular office or way of life.<sup>37</sup> As we have described, the doctrine

---

<sup>32</sup> Lester DeKoster, *Work the Meaning of Your Life*, (Christian Library Press, 1982) , 34.

<sup>33</sup> Albert M. Wolters, Michael W. Goheen, *Creation Regained: Biblical Basics for a Reformational Worldview* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1985), 42.

<sup>34</sup> Mark Noll, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1994), 51.

<sup>35</sup> Herbert Schlossberg, *Idols for Destruction* (Nashville, Tenn.: Thomas Nelson, 1983), 324.

<sup>36</sup> 2 Thessalonians 2:14.

<sup>37</sup> 1 Corinthians 1:1-2; 7:15-20.

of vocation was developed with its greatest rigor by Luther, Calvin and the other Reformers. They believed that our first call is to follow Jesus out of darkness into the light, out of death into life (what Os Guinness calls our primary calling). They also recognized something called Vocation/Calling, the call to God and to His service in various spheres of life (what Os Guinness calls our secondary calling). Vocations/callings are often stable and permanent over a lifetime and are not as mysterious as some may think. Rather, they are directly related to the discovery of our God-given talents which we then hone over time into skills and useful competencies to be used for the glory of God and the service of our fellow man. This is described by Frederick Buechner as, "The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet."<sup>38</sup> The Reformers saw a difference between Vocation/Calling and Occupation. Occupation was seen as opportunity (God's providence) for service presented to believers that enabled them to fulfill their vocations/callings through what we would call everyday work. Occupations often change throughout our lifetimes and are entered into through God's specific leadership, guidance, and provision. Our work, although not equal to our calling, is one of the most important means by which God uses us to fulfill his purpose. This is why Paul Stevens can make the comment, "...the New Testament treats work in the context of a larger framework: the call of God to live totally for him and his kingdom."<sup>39</sup>

The work of believers holds a significance that goes far beyond the visible results of that work. The significance to God comes from the person working, as much as the resulting work. There is no distinction between spiritual and temporal, sacred and secular work. All human work, however lowly, is capable of glorifying God. Work is, quite simply, an act of praise—a potentially productive act of praise. Work glorifies God, it serves the common good, and it is something through which human creativity can express itself. The last two, it must be stressed, are embraced by the first. As Calvin's English follower William Perkins put it, "The true end of our lives is to do service to God in serving of man."<sup>40</sup>

With this in mind, how do we then define work from a Biblical perspective? John Stott defines works as "the expenditure of energy (manual or mental or both) in the service of others, which brings fulfillment to the worker, benefit to the community and glory to God".<sup>41</sup> Dorothy Sayers give us a more detailed description believing that work should be seen,

“...not as a necessary drudgery to be undergone for the purpose of making

---

<sup>38</sup> Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking*, (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1993), 119.

<sup>39</sup> Paul Stevens, *Doing God's Business: Meaning and Motivation*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2006), 22.

<sup>40</sup> Alister McGrath, *Reformation Thought, An Introduction*, (Wiley-Blackwell Publishing: Hoboken, NJ 2006), 287.

<sup>41</sup> John Stott, *Issues Facing Christians Today* (Basingstoke, U.K.: Marshalls, 1984), 162.

money, but as a way of life in which the nature of man should find its proper exercise and delight and so fulfill itself to the glory of God. That it should, in fact, be thought of as a creative activity undertaken for the love of the work itself; and that man, made in God's image, should make things, as God makes them, for the sake of doing well a thing that is well worth doing."<sup>42</sup>

Our work matters profoundly to God. Through the faithful development of God-given talents we mature as Christians and become more useful in the kingdom of God and the kingdom of man. Through our faithful labor we imitate God's own creativity, order and appreciation for beauty and excellence. The Reformers clearly understood this and as a result the Protestant church during the Reformation enjoyed its greatest cultural influence, seen in art, literature, music, as well as in the social institutions of their day. Recovering this doctrine may well open the way for contemporary Christians to influence their cultures once again.<sup>43</sup>

### **How Then Shall We Work?**

What are the implications of this "Biblical Doctrine of Work" for Christians today? First, we must rediscover that our primary vocation is the call to follow Jesus and realize that this call embraces the whole of our lives, including our everyday work. We cannot separate our spiritual lives from our so-called 'secular' lives and engage in the dualism that is epidemic in evangelical Christianity. We must rediscover the priesthood of all believers seeing every part of our life, work, civic, family, recreational, church, as a 'living sacrifice' to God.<sup>44</sup> We cannot conduct our business in the world with the same values and attitudes as everyone else, and then confine our spiritual life to the weekend and evenings. We must ask questions like: "If God is the most important thing--how should I be conducting my business? How should I be spending my money? How should I live in my neighborhood and municipality? How should I be acting and living in this area of my life?"<sup>45</sup> The answers to these questions will help us successfully integrate the life of faith with work.

We must realize that our Vocation/Calling will be different for different people and different at different stages in our lives. We must embrace a view of our vocation which includes some constant elements but is also flexible enough to help us make sense of lives in which the nature and mix of work that we do is regularly changing. We also must maintain a broad definition of work that encompasses not only paid employment but also domestic work and voluntary work.

---

<sup>42</sup> Dorothy Sayers, *Creed or Chaos?* (Manchester, NH: Sophia Institute Press, 1974), 89.

<sup>43</sup> Gene Veith, *God at Work, Your Christian Vocation in All of Life*, (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2002), 24.

<sup>44</sup> Rom 12:1ff; cf. 1 Cor 10:31.

<sup>45</sup> Tim Keller, *What Is Christian Cultural Renewal*, (New York: MCM, 2003) 10.

We must be committed to the idea that we express our Christian discipleship through our employment which is an important part of life. It is in this realm that we are called to stewardship. An important statement is made in Luke 12:42-48, “from the one who has been entrusted with much, much more will be asked.” These are terms of stewardship. The best commentary on this statement is found in Matthew 25:20-23 (Jesus’ parable of the talents). This parable tells us that the Master expects us to work while we wait for his return. It also shows us that all we are and have are a capital investment from the Lord that we are to invest and return to him with interest. There will be an accounting of our blessings. Blessed is the one who can meet that accounting joyfully, but woe to the one who has proven unfaithful. We work hard to produce that return for the master not because we fear him but out of gratitude for what he has done for us.<sup>46</sup>

We also must understand the tension present in the scriptures regarding work. You will not have a meaningful life without work, but you must not make your work the meaning of your life. As Christians we must find our identity in Christ, not in our work. Yet, work is the major way we respond to God’s call in our life by being salt and light in a tasteless and dark world. This view of work must also appreciate the place of leisure and the contemplative dimensions of life and how they are integrated into our working lives. God rested from his labors on the seventh day and so should we.<sup>47</sup>

Finally, we must realize that through the Christian doctrine of work, God changes the culture.

Christians cannot simply rest satisfied with individual conversions or separated enclaves when they discern the central plot-line of the Bible: A) God created a world of peace and life; B) the world has fallen into a state of injustice and brokenness; C) God has determined to redeem this world through the work of his Son and the creation of a new humanity; until D) eventually the world is renewed and restored to being the world that he made and that we all want. In short, the purpose of redemption is not to help individuals escape the world. It is about the coming of God's kingdom to renew it. God’s purpose is not only saved individuals, but also a new world based on justice, peace, and love, not power,

---

<sup>46</sup> Dane W. Fowlkes, *Kingdom Campus: Re-envisioning the Christian College as a Kingdom Resource*, Paper, Council of Christian Colleges and Universities, Washington DC.

<sup>47</sup> Genesis 2:2.

strife, and selfishness. If God is so committed to this that he suffered and died, surely Christians should also seek a society based on God's peace and love.<sup>48</sup> If we want to impact our culture and truly be salt and light, we must teach Christians how to integrate their faith and their work. We must teach them to how to do their jobs with Christian distinctiveness, with excellence and with accountability.

## **Conclusion**

As believers at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, we stand in the same place as the Reformers. We have the opportunity to teach the truth of Scripture, including the biblical doctrine of work and radically impact our culture making a positive difference in our communities, our cities, our country and our world for the glory of God and His Kingdom. "If Christianity is to remain a positive force and influence in American public life, all Christians need to be present within that life, as salt and light. To remain safely behind the barricades may seem more secure, and a lot less risky-but it denies us any chance of reforming, renewing, and recalling our culture. The legacy of John Calvin (and the other reformers) invites us to engage our world, and instructs us in how to do so with integrity."<sup>49</sup> If we are serious about making a difference, we need to help the Church rediscover the "Biblical Doctrine of Work."

---

<sup>48</sup> Tim Keller, James Davidson Hunter, *Getting Upstream to Transform the City* (New York: Redeemer Church Planting Center, 2003).

<sup>49</sup> Alister McGrath, "Calvin and the Christian Calling," *First Things* 94 (June/July 1999): 31-35.