

THEOLOGY OF WORK No. 1

“Introduction, No. 1”

March 26, 2006

Genesis 2:15

Tonight we begin a new series of sermons, this devoted to the Bible’s theology of work. Rather than simply pick up a different part of the Bible and begin in chapter 1, I thought I would do another of these series devoted to a theme as I have done from time to time. It provides a change of pace and allows me to address an issue of real importance to us all. I actually did such a series on the Bible’s theology and ethics of work some fifteen years ago, but not only were many of you not here then and many others who were here were children, but the working life of American adults has changed in those fifteen years. Many women who were homemakers fifteen years ago are now at work outside the home. The likelihood of a person staying for many years, even for his or her entire working life, in the same job is considerably less nowadays than it was even fifteen years ago. What is more, I have read some material on the subject by Christian writers that was not available the last time I considered this theme. Given the fact that our work so profoundly contributes to the sum of our lives – takes so much of our time and energy, is, for many of us, a primary center of satisfaction or frustration, of fulfillment or longing, and is that point where we come most directly into contact with the unbelieving world and so where our Christian faith and life ought to tell most visibly – it is a subject to which we ought to return from time to time.

Now I am speaking about work in terms of one’s living, one’s occupation. Obviously the term can be used in different ways. A man can work in his backyard on Saturday afternoon, mowing his lawn and pruning his trees. Or a woman can work hard preparing a birthday party for one of her children. That is work as well, but not the way we are using the term for the purposes of this series. We mean a person’s occupation. The Bible uses the term in this way, as, for example, in Psalm 104:23:

“Then man goes out to his work, to his labor until evening.”

To be sure, there are, as well, a great many people who don’t go out to their work. A very large portion of the world’s workforce is mothers who work at home, homemakers as they are still called. That is their work as surely as an office or shop may the work of someone else. We are talking about a person’s living, his or her occupation, what they devote themselves to as those who have a job to do, work to perform, a calling to fulfill.

There are many reasons why Christians ought to think hard about their work.

1. As we just read, the Bible begins with God giving man a command to work. Work is God’s order for human life. The Bible has a great deal to say about work and so it is obviously a matter of importance to God and so it must be a matter of importance to his people.
2. Almost all of us except the very young are involved in work in some way. We have many young people who are students, but for them study is their work. Paul says that whatever we do, in word or in deed, we are to do it to the glory of God. That means, for most of us, that if our lives must be sanctified our work must be as well because work is a large part of our lives. We spend many more hours at work than we do at church or even than we do at home with our families.
3. It is sad, but true that many Christians practice a dichotomy between faith and work, leaving their faith behind when they go to their jobs. I have known such people. They have one reputation at

church and an entirely different one at work. The Bible teaches us to think seamlessly about our lives and to practice our faith in Christ in the one place as in the other.

4. Work poses many temptations to the Christian and these should be recognized and Christians taught how to resist them.
5. Our work provides many of us with some of our best opportunities to serve the Lord and to bear witness to his law and grace. Christian workers are the vanguard of the kingdom of God in an unbelieving society.
6. As our society and our economic life move farther and farther away from the ways of God, new issues and new questions are being posed for Christians and their loyalty to Christ is being tested in new ways. Christians should have a thoughtful understanding of what following Christ may mean for them in the working world. Serious Christians are wrestling with this very sort of issues all the time.
 - a. Can a Christian work on Madison Ave. where the corruption of truth is a way of life and where pandering to the worst in men and women is a method of choice for advertisers?
 - b. What about working in a banking business in which credit is thrown at people in defiance of their best interest?
 - c. What are the duties of an employee in a working environment where employee pilfering is rife, or where supervisors are cruel and unfair, or where customers are receiving increasingly shoddy merchandise or service?
 - d. Is the modern customer always right?
 - e. What about work on the Sabbath Day? At what point must a Christian draw the line in a society that is fast erasing any distinction between Sunday and the other days of the week? And the questions go on and on.

I'm not saying that the answers to these questions are always simple. Some questions are easier to answer than others. We certainly accept that there are some jobs a Christian cannot have. You may have heard the story of the mobster Mickey Cohen who made a profession of faith in Christ at a Billy Graham crusade in the 1950s. The news was flashed around the world that a mobster had been converted. But some time later it was obvious to observers that Cohen was still living and working as a mobster. His reply was to the effect that as there were Christian carpenters and Christian waitresses, he was a Christian mobster. But one cannot be a Christian mobster, any more than one can be a Christian drug pusher, or a Christian burglar, or a Christian prostitute, or a Christian Wall Street inside trader. But, then, you could be, as John the Baptist explicitly said, a Christian soldier of imperial Rome pacifying a conquered country, such as Judea. Questions as to what can and cannot be Christian work and as to how Christians must do their work differently from non-Christians have always existed, but they seem to be coming fast and furious in our time. There can be no doubt that our faith is being tried in the workplace and it is requiring more and more courage of Christians to be Christians there.

When the business community itself nowadays openly admits that it is suffering terribly from a loss of ethics, when the country has been rocked time and again in recent years by the implosion of enormous companies – think of Enron, Arthur Anderson, and WorldCom – largely as a result of malfeasance by corporate management, we can be sure that Christians will face new challenges in the working environment. On the other hand, that same ethical environment presents the followers of Christ with a grand opportunity to adorn the teaching of the Lord Jesus in the eyes of the world.

William Diehl, a former executive of Bethlehem Steel, once wrote:

“...In the almost thirty years of my professional career, my church has never once suggested that there be any type of accounting of my on-the-job ministry to others. My church has never once offered to

improve those skills which could make me a better minister, nor has it ever asked if I needed any kind of support in what I was doing. There has never been an enquiry into the types of ethical decisions I must face, or whether I seek to communicate my faith to my co-workers. I have never been in a congregation where there was any type of public affirmation of a ministry in my career. In short, I must conclude that my church doesn't have the least interest whether or how I minister in my daily work." [W. Diehl, *Christianity and Real Life*, v-vi, cited in R. Paul Stevens, *The Other Six Days: Vocation, Work, and Ministry in Biblical Perspective*, 49]

I don't want any of you, whether homemaker or corporate executive, teacher or salesman, carpenter or office worker, to be able to say that! The church should be intensely interested in your life at work and your life of work because it is a large part of that life and service you are to offer to God in gratitude and love for his saving grace to you in Jesus Christ. The work Christians do is the presence of the Kingdom of God in the very heart of the devil's kingdom.

Tonight I want to begin setting out what we may call the Bible's theology of work, the teaching about work in the Bible, the way we are given in Holy Scripture to understand the place of work in God's plan for human life. Now I want you to notice and reckon with that phrase: theology of work. "Theology," literally, means the teaching about God. It is then used in a derivative way to describe all the teaching of God's Word. It is a synonym for biblical doctrine or teaching. It is in this latter sense that we can speak of a theology of work. The Bible teaches us about work so there is a doctrine or a theology of work. But the original sense has not entirely disappeared. What we have in the Bible is precisely the relationship between God and our work, a divine perspective on work. So by theology of work we mean work as it is taught by God in God's word, as it is subject to God and to God's purposes: the fundamental principles by which work takes its place in the plan of God for our lives and the God-given ethics that govern our working life, that is, how we ought to perform our work, serve our boss, our customer, our employees and the like. Everyone's working life is different in many ways – the homemaker does not have the same working life that the business manager does – but there is a biblical theology of work that applies to each and every Christian no matter the setting of his or her work.

We tend to think of theology as the province of the professional seminary teacher or, perhaps, the church's minister. But the Bible was not written for the professional theologian. It was written for believers, for Christians themselves. Theology is not intended to be the province of a few, but the learning of everyone in the church. Even theology as it is studied and written by professional teachers ought to very obviously serve the interests of the church and ordinary Christians. That is what the teaching of the Bible was intended to do and, supposedly, that is what theology is the study of: the teaching of the Bible.

There have been times in the church's past when it seemed that every Christian was a theologian. In the midst of the Arian controversy of the 4th century, Gregory of Nazianzus wrote, in 379, "If in this city you ask anyone for change, he will discuss with you whether the Son is begotten or unbegotten." Now Gregory didn't necessarily mean that all of that theological reflection by laymen was informed and helpful. But the measure interest was certainly right. We ought all to care deeply about what the Bible teaches and we ought to care about that teaching shaping our lives in every good way. Biblical theology is intensely practical and always has in view its impact on the heart and the life.

The Puritans saw this very clearly. William Perkins, who might be described as the father of English Puritanism defined theology as "the science of living blessedly forever." That is why Puritan works of theology were almost always accessible to laymen. They were written with the life of the church and her

people in mind. They thought deeply about the teaching of the Word of God, as professionals they were thoroughly conversant with the historical debates, they read the Latin tomes, but they thought and they wrote with the Christian man and woman in mind. So much of modern professional theology is either incomprehensible to the layman or irrelevant to his life. Not so the teaching of the Bible.

There is no revelation in the Bible that is given simply to satisfy our curiosity or to give professional thinkers something to ponder. Every piece of information we are given in the Bible about God, man, salvation, and the Christian life is addressed to us. It is all a summons. It is all truth to be lived. So the Christian's task, every Christian, is to find out what God teaches us in his word about any subject and then incorporate that teaching into our daily living. Every Christian worker is to be a theologian of work. That is what we are about in this series. My attempt will be to make us all biblical theologians of work and especially of our own work.

So let me begin this evening and lay the foundation for all our subsequent reflection on the materials the Bible furnishes us with which to construct a theology of work. This is our first principle, and perhaps this is the sum and substance of everything else the Bible will teach us about our working lives: work is holy. Work is from God and it is to be done for God. Work is to be part of that worship of our lives by which we do all things to the glory of God.

In Eden, at the beginning of time, man was given work to do. He was both to till the garden and to guard it (Gen. 2:15). He was both farmer and watchman. He had a calling and that calling was his work. And in the account of all that in Genesis 2 we are obviously dealing with representative facts. We are not finding out about the life of Adam only, but about the life of mankind. In that early material we have Adam as worker, as steward and vice-regent of creation, we have Adam as husband and Eve as wife, we have Adam in relationship to God and as worshipper of God; we have all of that in this early material. There Adam is every man, every human being. And as every man he is homo laborans, working man. And, as we will see, the Bible develops or elaborates this identity of human beings from that point.

Work – that kind of work (farming and being a watchman, for example) – is the divine calling of every human being. Man was not made first to recreate but to work. That God gave him a day of rest is directly related to the fact that, in imitation of God, man would work the other six days of the week. His was to be a laboring life. It was to have a rhythm, but that rhythm was six days of work and one of rest. God worked and then rested and man's life is to be lived in imitation of his creator. Work originates in God himself and to be a worker is part of what it means for man to have been created in God's image and likeness. So we are not surprised as we read the Bible to find man working everywhere we look. Work – work conceived as an occupation, as a living – is God's will for our lives. Work is what God created us to do. And so work is holy. It has a divine purpose and is a divine calling.

That, however, is a fundamental biblical conviction that the church has all too often let slip from her grasp. Too often she has come to think of the ordinary work of ordinary Christians as, if not positively unholy, at least less holy. Farming and guarding, such as Adam was called to do, became "secular" work, of much less importance, certainly much less Christian than other sorts of work, the kind of work that ministers do, for example. Compare these two well-known pieces of early Christian writing. In the first, the early Christian letter Ad Diognetum, usually dated in the middle of the 2nd century, Christians are viewed as sharing the lot of other human beings but living very distinctive lives among them. They did not draw apart to live a separated life. They shared a common life but with a difference. They had a sense of vocation. They lived in the same world but according to a different set of convictions, a

different set of standards, and a different set of purposes and intentions. Their holiness was found in the way that they lived the life that unbelievers had to live as well.

“For Christians cannot be distinguished from the rest of the human race by country or language or customs. They do not live in cities of their own; they do not use a peculiar form of speech; they do not follow an eccentric manner of life. This doctrine of theirs has not been discovered by the ingenuity of deep thought of inquisitive men, nor do they put forward a merely human teaching, as some people do. Yet, although they live in Greek and barbarian cities alike, as each man’s lot has been cast, and follow the customs of the country in clothing and food and other matters of daily living, at the same time they give proof of the remarkable and admittedly extraordinary constitution of their own commonwealth. They live in their own countries, but only as aliens. They have a share in everything as citizens, and endure everything as foreigners. Every foreign land is their fatherland, and yet for them every fatherland is a foreign country. They marry, like everyone else, and they beget children, but they do not cast out their offspring. They share their board with each other, but not their marriage bed. It is true that they are “in the flesh,” but they do not live “according to the flesh.” They busy themselves on earth, but their citizenship is in heaven. They obey the established laws, but in their own lives they go far beyond what the laws require.”

There is no specific mention of occupations in that statement, but it is obviously the assumption. They work the same jobs as their neighbors, but with this difference; that they are decidedly and unabashedly followers of Christ in the way they do their work. In this early Christian writing Christians are seen as working out their holiness in the ordinary callings of their lives.

But come forward a century and a half to Eusebius, the great 4th century church historian. The picture here is very different.

“Two ways of life were...given by the law of Christ to his church. The one is above nature, and beyond common human living; it admits not marriage, child-bearing, property nor the possession of wealth, but, wholly and permanently separate from the common customary life of mankind, it devotes itself to the service of God alone in its wealth of heavenly love! And they who enter on this course appear to die to the life of mortals, to bear with them nothing earthly but their body, and mind and spirit to have passed to heaven....Such then is the perfect form of the Christian life. And the other, more humble, more human, permits men to join in pure nuptials and to produce children, to undertake government, to give orders to soldiers...; it allows them to have minds for farming, for trade, and the other more secular interests as well as for religion; and it is for them that times of retreat and instruction, and days for hearing sacred things are set apart. And a kind of secondary grade of piety is attributed to them, giving just such help as such lives require, so that all men...have their part in the coming of salvation, and profit by the teaching of the gospel.” [Demonstratio Evangelica, I, viii cited in W.R. Forrester, Christian Vocation, 43]

By the time of Eusebius the occupations of most Christians, their working lives if you will, had become not the sacred sphere which Christians answer the divine call to be workers, but a kind of second class living for those who couldn’t aspire to higher things. And the truly Christian form of work was found not in the way and purpose for which work was done but the kind of work that was performed. Adam the farmer was no longer adequate. Now Adam must be a monk or a nun. Other work was secular, comparatively unimportant and had little bearing on the eternal issues of life.

That idea has, alas, been very deeply rooted in the Christian psyche, even the Protestant evangelical and Reformed psyche. And the results of this way of thinking have always been the same: Christian people in their working lives have sunk farther and farther from the influences of God's Word and they live two lives, one for church and one for the world. Very often their two lives had little to do with one another. Genuine Christianity, the real work of the kingdom of God, was for a spiritual aristocracy. The rest of the church worked to make a living. Perhaps they never thought to be Christian mobsters, but they did not think carefully about what it meant to be a Christian in their job and how they might serve the Lord in their work and how it might become a ministry in as true a way as gospel preaching is a ministry.

You will have to ask yourselves to what extent you have fallen prey to this kind of thinking, easy enough when it allows us to be less of a Christian at our job. It is always harder to be more of a Christian at work and easier to be less of one, so any viewpoint that encourages us to think less of the Christian's calling to be decidedly a Christian on the job is going to be subtly attractive and beguiling to us. We find anything appealing that makes life easier for us; we have to work at embracing a view of things that is bound to make our lives harder. But the Christian life is hard – however wonderfully fulfilling and satisfying – it is demanding and requires difficult things for us. So living as a Christian, really living as a Christian at work is always to make life harder in some ways. No wonder then the popularity of the view that because ordinary, secular work is second-class work in the nature of the case, a Christian needn't invest too much of his faith in it.

We will stop at this point and continue next week with the Reformation's demolition of this way of thinking about the Christian's work. Remember we are laying the foundation of a theology of work and we are going to say that your work, your occupation is a divine calling, in which you are to serve God and worship him as really, if in a different way, than you serve and worship him on the Lord's Day in this house.