Leading Your People in a Biblical Theology of Work

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I
Renewed Evangelical Interest in a Theology of Work

Among those who locate themselves within the Reformed and broadly evangelical tradition, it should be uncontroversial to assert that faithful pastoral leadership entails shepherding our people to think and live biblically. It should be just as uncontroversial to say that a theology of work is essential to this task of pastoral leadership.

Given the amount of material published on work and vocation in the last twenty-five years, however, it seems that the above statement has needed some defending. We will consider in a moment the reasons the evangelical church has required some re-alignment on the topic of work within the last three decades. For now, it is only important to observe that the sheer abundance of publishing on this topic is a sign of a vital theological need within the evangelical church, and pastors should take notice.

Nearly four decades ago, in a chapter addressing the topic of work from a counseling perspective, Jay Adams noted the scarcity of evangelical engagement on the topic. He often addressed the issue of work and its relationship to discipleship in his books on counseling,[1] but he also saw a need among evangelicals for full-length, vigorously theological treatments of the doctrine.[2]

About fifteen years after Adams' plea, Doug Sherman and William Hendricks penned, *Your Work Matters to God*, in which they sought to provide readers with a theology of work while dismantling the notion that one's daily work was of less importance than allegedly more spiritual activities like

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[1]See Jay Adams, *Competent to Counsel* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1970), 141-44; *Shepherding God's Flock: A Handbook on Pastoral Ministry, Counseling, and Leadership* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1975), 268-69.

[2]Jay Adams, *A Theology of Christian Counseling: More Than Redemption* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1979), 138.

evangelism, missions, and Bible studies.[3] Building from the ground up, Sherman and Hendricks developed their doctrine of work from Scripture, starting with the creation narrative and the truth that God has revealed himself as a worker and made mankind to be a worker.[4] In 2002, about fifteen years after Sherman and Hendricks penned their book, Gene Veith published *God at Work: Your Christian Vocation in All of Life*, addressing the same concerns as Sherman and Hendricks while aiming to help Christians view their daily work as a place where they served God and could be rich in good works.[5]

Since Veith's book, we have seen a high concentration of books on the topic of work from an evangelical perspective,[6] with the most recent

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[3]Doug Sherman and William Hendricks, *Your Work Matters to God* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1987). This book was the fruit of Sherman's Th.M. Thesis, "Toward a Christian Theology of Work" (Dallas Theological Seminary, 1984).

[4]Sherman and Hendricks, *Your Work Matters to God*, 77-84.

[5]Gene Veith, *God at Work: Your Christian Vocation in All of Life* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2002). Concerning the issue of a Christian's good works, Veith writes, "Good works, for the most part, are done in vocation" (133).

[6]For example, Wayne Grudem, *Business for the Glory of God: The Bible's Teaching on the Moral Goodness of Business* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2003); Ben Witherington III, *Work: A Kingdom Perspective on Labor* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011); Lester DeKoster, *Work: The Meaning of Your Life,* Second Edition (Grand Rapids: Christian Library Press, 2011)*;* Chad Brand, *Flourishing Faith: A Baptist Primer on Work, Economics, and Civil Stewardship* (Grand Rapids: Christian Library Press, 2012); Tim Chester, *Gospel-Centered Work: Becoming the Worker God Wants You to Be* (Charlotte, NC: The Good Book Company, 2013); John Bolt, *Economic Shalom: A Reformed Primer on Faith, Work and Human Flourishing* (Grand Rapids: Christian Library Press, 2013); Sabastian Trager and Greg Gilbert, *The Gospel at Work: How Working for Jesus Gives Purpose and Meaning to Our Jobs* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2013); Tim Keller, *Every Good Endeavor: Connecting Your Work with God's Work* (New York: Penguin, 2014); Matt Perman, *What's Best Next: How the Gospel Transforms the Way You Get Things Done* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014); Benjamin T. Quinn and Walter R. Strickland, *Every Waking Hour: An Introduction to Work and Vocation for Christians* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham, 2016); Jim Hamilton, *Work and our Labor in the Lord* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2017); Gordon Fee, *Offer Yourselves to God: Vocation, Work, and Ministry in Paul's Epistles* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2019); Daniel Doriani, *Work: It's Purpose, Dignity, and Transformation* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 2019); Douglas Wilson, *Ploductivity: A Practical Theology of Work and Wealth* (Moscow, ID: Canon Press, 2020); Matthew Kaemingk and Cory B. Wilson, *Work and Worship: Reconnecting our Labor and Liturgy* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2020); Daniel Dorinai, *Work that Makes a Difference (P*hillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 2021); David Benson, Kara Martin, and Andrew Sloane, *Transforming Vocation: Connecting Theology, Church, and the Workplace for the Flourishing World*, Australian College of Theology Monograph Series (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2021). Bryan Chapell, *Grace at Work: Redeeming the Grind and the Glory of Your Work* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2022);

contribution coming earlier this year from economist and wealth manager, David Bahnsen.[7] Along with these published works is a growing collection of websites that offer readers many excellent resources that trade on the same themes as the above books.

Why the Recent Evangelical Renewal in a Theology of Work?

We may legitimately ask why evangelical authors and publishers have recently flooded the market with books on the topic of work and vocation. While it is impossible to exhaust this question given the number of factors that shape ecclesiastical need, there are a few reasons we can offer for why work has lately become a topic of interest among evangelicals.

First, confusion over the issue of work pervades our culture. We can see this lack of clarity, for example, in historical treatments of the topic. Some non-Christian authors perpetuate the notion that work is punishment for man's sin. Failing to carefully distinguish between the original gift *of* work rooted in creation and frustration *in* work as a result of the fall, secular writers give the impression that Christianity is to blame for our woes at work. UK-based author and columnist Richard Donkin asks, "…when did work begin to take on its biblical definition as a burden, something that man, in his punishment, would be compelled to suffer, 'in the sweat of thy face.'"[8] As we will see later, Scripture places work well before the fall and views it as a gift

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J. Daryl Charles, *Our Secular Vocation: Rethinking the Church's Calling to the Marketplace* (Nashville: B & H, 2023).

[7]David Bahnsen, *Full Time: Work and the Meaning of Life* (New York: PostHill, 2024). Bahnsen is the son of the late theologian and apologist, Greg Bahnsen. David Bahnsen writes from a broadly Reformed perspective.

[8]Richard Donkin, *The History of Work* (Houndmills, England: Palgrave MacMillan, 2010), 11-12. Earlier in the book, Donkin describes the Protestant work ethic as "an ethos that has defined work for many people for hundreds of years [in Western society], creating the belief among most of us that work is a toil that it is actually something we would rather not be doing, but we know we must do, nevertheless, because therein lies salvation; there is virtue in its accomplishment" (xx). This is a woefully mistaken view of the so-called Protestant work ethic and its biblical foundations. Donkin misses the important distinction between work as part of the original creation and work in a post-fall world. He also fails to distinguish between eternal salvation (which cannot be achieved by work) and earthly satisfaction (what *can* be achieved by work). *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* misunderstands the biblical position on work when it says, "The Christian tradition contains several different views of work, including that work is toil for human sin, that work should be a calling or vocation by which one glorifies God or carries out God's will, and that work is an arena in which to manifest one's status as elect in the eyes of God (the 'Protestant work ethic')" ("Philosophical Approaches to Work," January 11, 2022, https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/work-labor/. Accessed May 28, 2024.

from God to his creatures, and one of the primary ways we reflect our Creator. Work is not punishment for our sin—frustration is.

Corresponding to the idea of work as a burden and punishment for sin is the American notion of retirement as a time when one *stops* working in order to enjoy two or more decades of unencumbered leisure.[9] While both of these viewpoints are unbiblical—work as punishment and work as a mere means to leisure—it is naïve to conclude that our people are not influenced by these misguided notions about work and are impervious to their negative effects.[10] Christian authors have noticed this trend over the last three decades and responded to it.

Second, the church, throughout its history, has often tended toward a more or less Gnostic/Platonic[11] view of the human body and a corollary dichotomy between the sacred and the secular. In the early and medieval church, for example, Gnosticism and Greek philosophy exerted a strong influence on the church and its practice of monasticism[12] and shaped the view, held among some of the church's most significant theologians, that the contemplative life was superior to the active life.[13] Initially, the monastics did

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[9]Jeff Haanen, *An Uncommon Guide to Retirement* (Chicago: Moody, 2019). Haanen, Founder and Executive Director of Denver Institute for Faith and Work, observes that "the dominant paradigm of retirement is about vacation—how to afford it, and then how to make the most of it" (20).

[10]As anecdotal evidence, I remember speaking with a Christian woman several years ago who had graduated with a Bible degree from a prestigious Christian university, but who had always assumed, until she was in her mid-twenties, that work was given to man *after* the fall, not before. Needless to say, this outlook affected her desire and ambition for work.

[11]I place these two systems together, not because, historically speaking, they contain all the same features or because one derived from the other, but because the dichotomy between flesh and spirit resides at the center of both worldviews, in whatever form they take.

[12]See Phillip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church,* vol. 3: Nicene and Post-Nicene Christianity, AD. 311-590 (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2009), 153-54. Schaff is careful to distinguish between the worldview and the motives of "heathen" aestheticism and Catholic asceticism. He nevertheless argues that Gnosticism did "exert a powerful influence on the Catholic asceticism and its view of the world…" (154).

[13]J. Daryl Charles, writes, "The ancient roots of this disjunction [between the sacred and the secular], as characterized by the purported superiority of the *vita contemplative* over a *vita activa*, can be found in the early church and extend both to the medieval church and beyond" (*Our Secular Vocation: Rethinking the Church's Calling to the Marketplace* [Nashville: B & H, 2023], 5. See also Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*: "Monasticism was from the first distinguished as the contemplative life from the practical" (3:158). Thomas Aquinas formally defended the superiority of

not consider the physical body evil in and of itself.[14] But such a view eventually crept into later monasticism.[15] For early monastics who joined a community (as opposed to anchorites who sought complete solitude), work appears to have been a regular feature of the cloister.[16] This approach toward work was not consistent throughout church history, however, as some later monasteries were characterized by idleness.[17] In the Middle Ages, some monastics embraced voluntary poverty and did not work for their living but begged for their food.[18] Nevertheless, from its inception, monasticism was "praised as the highest form of earthly existence"[19] and provided the "shortest and surest road to heaven."[20] The division between the flesh and the spirit was well established by the Middle Ages.

In the context of a maturing sacramental theology, the medieval church exacerbated this implicit dichotomy between the physical and the spiritual,

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the contemplative life over the active life in his *Summa Theologia*, II-II, Q. 182, Art. 1.

[14]Everett Ferguson, *Church History: From Christ to Pre-Reformation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 228.

[15]Bruce L. Shelly, *Church History In Plain Language*, Fourth Edition (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2013), 132. Shelly writes, "Above all, the Benedictine conception of the Christian life was essentially unnatural. 'To enter a monastery was to separate from the world, to abandon the ordinary relationships of social life,' to shun marriage and all that the Christian home signifies. And supporting the whole endeavor was an erroneous view of man. The soul, said the monk, is chained to the flesh like a prisoner to a corpse. That is not the biblical view of life, and it created a fundamental flaw in monasticism" (132).

[16] Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 3:160. Benedict of Nursia (c. 480-550), for example, made manual labor a key feature of his "Rule." See "The Rule of St. Benedict," in *Callings: Twenty Centuries of Christian Wisdom on Vocation*, ed., William C. Placher (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 131-32.

[17] Phillip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church,* vol. 5: The Middle Ages, 1049-1294 (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 314.

[17] Schaff, *History of the Christian Church,* 5:323-25.

[18]The most famous example is St. Patrick of Assisi (1182-1226). Patrick founded the Catholic religious order called The Franciscans. As Francis gathered followers, he wrote a rule for them. "The rule exalted poverty, not as a means to a spiritual end, but as an end in itself. Franciscans renounced ownership of all property; they were spiritually married to 'Lady Poverty' and begged for their food" (Nick Needham, *2000 Years of Christ's Power,* vol. 2: The Middle Ages [Ross-shire, Scottland, 2016], 342-43). It seems that Francis may have changed this outlook on work in his *Later Rule* (1223). Nevertheless, there remained an unhealthy attachment to poverty as a spiritually superior state of being, as he referred to his followers as "servants of God and disciples of most holy Poverty."

[19]Schaff, *History of the Christian Church,* 5:314.

[20]Schaff, *History of the Christian Church,* 5:314.

forming a strong cleavage between the so-called sacred and the secular.[21] The idea that greater amounts of justifying grace were located in the church and in religious activity by necessity created a distinction between the clergy and the laity and between the sacred and the secular. [22] Thus, "vocation" or "calling" came to be applied only to priests, monks, and nuns. Leland Ryken explains, "In this [sacred-secular] framework, truly spiritual people are monks, nuns, and clerics. Ordinary people belong spiritually to a lower class."[23]

The Reformers' re-discovery of justification by faith would directly undermine this sacred-secular dichotomy. The truth of justification undercut the entire sacramental system and the division of the clergy and laity by showing that no one had greater or lesser access to justifying grace. The Reformers held that justification occurs at the moment of saving faith in Christ and could not be increased or decreased. The priest or nun, therefore, was no more justified than the cobbler or blacksmith. The work of both, therefore, was valuable to God as it was conducted in faith and according to God's Word.

At the time of the Reformation, although the word "vocation" applied exclusively to priests and nuns, Martin Luther (1483-1546) redefined this word to apply to any lawful employment in which a Christian might engage.[24] Also, good works were no longer exclusively conducted in the realm of the church or strictly "spiritual" spheres. A Christian could be rich in good works in any sphere if he lived by faith and loved his neighbor.[25]

Both Martin Luther and John Calvin (1509-1564) took aim at the sacred-

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[21]Leland Ryken comments, "The same division of life into the categories of sacred and secular, clerical and ordinary, became a leading feature of medieval Roman Catholicism." "'Some Kind of Life to Which We Were Called by God:' The Puritan Doctrine of Vocation," in *SBJT* 22.1 (2018): 46.

[22] Michael Reeves and Tim Chester, *Why the Reformation Still Matters* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2016), 182.

[23]Ryken, "'Some Kind of Life," 46. Ryken notes that this false antithesis between the so-called sacred and secular can be found in the Jewish Talmud (c. 400-500 BC) and in the church as early as Eusebius (d. 339 AD) (47). Doriani comments, "This distinction between active or secular work and the realm of the sacred and contemplation governed Christian thought for a millennium. Everyone knew work was necessary for life. They believed that it promoted discipline and humility and prevented idleness. They held that good work or good works could contribute to salvation. Clearly, they recognized that work had instrumental value, but they denied that work had intrinsic value. Because contemplation is superior to work, a wise disciple will labor as little as possible" (*Work*, 64).

[24]See Gustaf Wingren, *Luther on Vocation* (1957, repr., Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, n.d.); Ryken, "'Some Kind of Life," 47.

[25]Roland H. Bainton, *The Reformation of the Sixteenth Century*, enlarged edition (Boston: Beacon, 1952), 247.

secular divide that the Roman Catholic church had erected, often speaking on the value, necessity, and dignity of all work. "Your work is a very sacred matter," Luther wrote, "God delights in it, and through it He wants to bestow His blessing on you. This praise of work should be inscribed in all tools, on the forehead and the face that sweat from toiling."[26] Luther believed that God made us for the very purpose of work and provided for our needs *through* our work.[27] Calvin went so far as to say, "'No sacrifice is more pleasing to God than when every man applies himself diligently to his own calling.'"[28] He also argued that our work was a divinely ordained means to keep us out of trouble and to help us rightly order our lives. [29]

Post-Reformation theologians and pastors would follow Luther and Calvin's lead in dismantling a sacred-secular divide in relation to work.[30] Thomas Watson (1620-1686), for example, argued strongly against a kind of Christianity that promoted idleness in the name of spirituality and contended that a man's religion must express itself in the church and in the shop.[31] Wilhelmus a Brakel (1635-1711) stated plainly that it was God's will that man be occupied with a calling and to be faithful to it.[32] Cotton Mather (1663-1728) argued that every Christian should have a calling, a place of usefulness where they will spend most of their time.[33] Richard Steele (1671-1729), in his book, *The Religious Tradesman,* exalted the common labor of the tradesman and provided rich theological and practical counsel for Christians in the marketplace.[34] Charles Bridges (1794-1869) offered poignant comments

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[26]Edward M. Plass, ed., *What Luther Says: A Practical In-Home Anthology for the Active Christian* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1959), 1493.
[27]Plass, *What Luther Says*, 1495.
[28]Ryken, "'Some Kind of Life," 49.
[29]John Calvin, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion in Two Volumes* trans. by Ford Lewis Battles and ed. John T. McNeill (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960), III.10.6. See also John Calvin, *2 Thessalonians* in *Calvin's Commentaries,* vol. 21, ed. and trans. John Pringle (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 357: "For the truth is this: those are the most peaceable of all, that exercise themselves in lawful employments."
[30]See Ryken "Some Kind of Life," for many examples of Puritans taking direct aim at a sacred-secular dichotomy when it came to work.
[31]Thomas Watson, *A Godly Man's Picture* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1992), 169.
[32]Wilhelmus a Brakel, *God, Man, and Christ,* vol. 1 in *The Christian's Reasonable Service,* trans., Bartel Elshout and ed. Joel Beeke (Grand Rapids: Reformed Heritage, 2015), cxiii.
[33]Leland Ryken, *Worldly Saints: The Puritans as they Really Were* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), 27.
[34]Richard Steele, *The Religious Tradesman* (1667, repr., Harrisonburg, VA: Sprinkle Publications, 1989).

about the goodness of earthly life and the blessing of work throughout his commentary on Ecclesiastes.[35]

Today, despite the rich theological heritage left to us by the Reformers and the post-Reformers, Roger Olson notes that some evangelicals today display similar tendencies toward a gnostic dualism[36] that inevitably gives rise to a sacred-secular dichotomy. Gregg Allison argues that "Gnosticism continues….to infect the church," leading Christians to value the soul over the body and the immaterial over the physical. [37]

This implicit neo-Gnosticism will directly affect one's view of work. In such an outlook, work is necessary only for acquiring the goods of earthly survival and enabling one to serve God in a religious context. Work does not bear any intrinsic value—it is only valuable to the degree that it enables one to serve God in some other "spiritual" capacity. Thus, a sacred-secular split is maintained between that which is holy (the spiritual and eternal) and that which is common (the physical and temporal). You can find these underlying viewpoints expressed in popular evangelical literature. Consider this statement in a book on parenting in which the author exhorts dads to take the discipleship of their children more seriously.

> I often hear dads say, "Steve, I agree with what you are saying, and I wish I had more time to do some of the things you are talking about, but my job…" This is where I usually cut them off. God has given a job description to us, and there is no escape clause even for dads who work a certain amount of hours. You see, our career isn't really our job. Our career puts food on the table and keeps the

[35]Charles Bridges, *Commentary on Ecclesiastes* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1960): "And certainly no one has so little enjoyment of life, as he who is doing nothing in life" (85); "Idleness indeed places a man out of God's order. It should therefore have no place in God's fair creation" (85); "Work is at once the substance and the privilege of our service" (85); "A life of ease can never be a life of happiness, or the pathway to heaven" (86); "Real worth is determined, not by outward show, but by solid usefulness" (93).

[36]Roger E. Olson, *Westminster Handbook to Evangelical Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2004), 204: "Popular evangelical folk piety often misunderstands these as dualistic (physical versus spiritual) and as grossly physical. That is, evangelical lay people often misinterpret Scripture as promoting a view of human persons as godlike spirits imprisoned in physical bodies. A kind of rough Gnosticism pervades evangelical folk religion in spite of the best efforts of evangelical theologians."

[37]Gregg Allison, *Embodied: Living as Whole People in a Fractured World* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2021), 25-26.

> lights on so that we can do our real job. Our real job is laid our clearly in the Word.[38]

Wright then provides the following three facets of a dad's job description: Dads are to (1) love the Lord with everything they've got; (2) love and lead their bride; (3) love and teach their children.

We shouldn't have any problem with Wright's job description for dads as such, nor should we think it wrong for Wright to correct fathers who are using their daily workload as an excuse to avoid the biblical call to disciple their children. What we should find troubling is Wright's truncated view of work expressed in the above quote, and how such a view of work will impact both the married *and* unmarried people in our churches.[39] The problem is found in viewing a father's daily work (what Wright calls his "career") as a mere *means* to the real job of loving God, loving one's bride, and parenting one's children.

Given that this tendency toward a hyper-spiritualized view of earthly life and the human body is found *throughout* church history, I am persuaded that this propensity is not due to any particular set of historical or theological circumstances, although it may be intensified in some contexts more than others. Rather, because of *sin*, humanity has an inward bent to reject God's design and reframe our anthropology according to human wisdom, or what Paul calls, "the elemental spirits of the world" (Col 2:8).[40] This most recent uptick in evangelical attention to the topic of work is due to some immediate factors in our Western culture like the ones I mentioned above, but it is also due to the reality that this topic will *always* need to be addressed because of our tendency to embrace a false dichotomy between the physical and the spiritual, the sacred and the secular. Wise pastoral leadership will be characterized by careful attention to a theology of work.

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[38]Steve Wright, *ApParent Privilege* (Royal Palm Beach, FL: InQuest Ministries, 2008), 146.

[39]If pastors teach or imply that one's income-paying "career" is only useful to the point that it puts food on the table and keeps the lights on so that the dad can do his "real job," the single men of the church will *by necessity* sense that they are second-class Christians who can't please God as much as the married father of children.

[40]It is no coincidence that in a section where Paul is discussing the elemental spirits of the world that he must exhort his readers to reject any teaching that downplays the physical nature of earthly life (see Col 2:16-23).

II
Biblical and Theological Foundations for an Evangelical Theology of Work

Having considered the recent renewal in an evangelical theology of work, we now turn to consider the doctrine's biblical and theological foundations. Our study of human work, however, begins with God. Because we are created in God's image, it is only right that we study the nature of the Original to gain insight into those who have been created to be like him.

God, the Original Worker

The first observation we make in the creation account is that God reveals himself as a worker: "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth" (Gen 1:1). The remaining sections of Genesis 1:2-31 reveal a God who crafts, forms, divides, sorts, exhibits immense creativity and wisdom, organizes his productivity to occur on specific days, and, in the process, enjoys the satisfaction of work well done. Regarding this last point, after nearly every completed day's work, Scripture reports that "God saw that it was good" (Gen 1:10, 12, 17, 21, 25). When he fashioned and placed the final jewel in the crown of his creation, he stood back and rejoiced in his excellent craftsmanship: "And behold, it was very good" (Gen 1:31). The Creator is not only a God who works, but a God who finds satisfaction in his work.

But are we reading too much into Genesis 1:1-31? Are we supposed to view God as a craftsman, shaping his creation and finding satisfaction in his work? Yes, without hesitation. First, Genesis 2:1-2 summarizes Genesis 1:1-31 by categorizing God's creative activity as "work" (מְלָאכְתּ). This word for "work" is used throughout the Old Testament to denote human work (e.g., Ex 20:9; Prov 24:27; Neh 4:15) and a few times with reference to skillful craftsmanship (see Ex 36:4; 1 Kings 7:14; Prov 22:29).

Second, later biblical writers view God's creative activity as work. The Psalmists, for example, in their reflections on the Genesis account, call the creation "the work of God's hands" (Ps 102:25), noting that the members of his creation are glad beneficiaries of his work (Ps 104:13). Solomon characterizes God's creative work as a demonstration of wisdom, skill, and delight (Prov 8:28-31). In the New Testament, God works through his Son (John 4:34) and through believers (Eph 3:20; Phil 1:6; 2:13; 1 Thess 2:13). Indeed, when Jesus was confronted about why he performed miracles on the Sabbath (i.e., worked), he characterizes his Father as the one who is always working (John 5:17). Given these strands of evidence, it is right to see the Genesis narrative portraying God as one who works. God is the original worker and the God who never stops working.

Humankind: Created to Work

As we trace the Genesis narrative from God's creation of the earth to his formation of man, it is fitting that we find work as man's *first* assignment (Gen 2:7-8, 15). The word translated "work" (עָבַד) in Genesis 2:15 is used in Genesis 2:5 to refer to cultivating the ground. The word translated "keep" is used elsewhere in the Old Testament to refer to protecting others (2 Sam 11:16; 26:13-16; Ps 121:7). These two general tasks, therefore, would have included productive labor such as food collection and distribution, plant and tree care, soil preparation (see 1 Chron 27:26, "tilling" in the ESV), taxonomy creation, productive use of the animals, organization, diligent protection of the garden from intruders, and so on.

Importantly, the word translated "work" in Genesis 2:15 is used throughout the OT to refer not only to productive labor (Ex 34:21) but also to serving God (Deut 11:13; 28:14; 22:5; Zeph 3:9) or serving idols (Judge 2:19; Jer 11:10). The connection here cannot be missed. Adam was created to serve God in the garden by attending to the creation tasks God had given him. His care for and protection of the garden *was* his service to God, for it was what God had created him to do (Gen 1:26-31). [41] In his original assignment, Adam's religious service to God was conducted in the context of his temporal, "earthly" labors.

The Frustration of Work

We see, then, that God tasked Adam with work before the fall and subsequent curse. Prior to the fall and curse, Adam would not have experienced any frustration or futility in fulfilling his daily tasks. The ground would have yielded its fruit in correspondence with Adam's effort and likely exceeded his exertion. Not yet afflicted by the sin of laziness, Adam would have also found unflagging joy in his work and seen it as an invigorating gift rather than something to avoid.

In response to Adam's sin, God cursed work. Both the woman's tasks of bearing and raising children and the man's task of bringing forth bread from the ground would receive God's direct judgment. For Eve, bringing forth children would be physically painful (Gen 3:16). For Adam, subduing the earth and enjoying its yield would be fraught with frustration and futility (Gen 3:17-19).

But not only would their tasks require more exertion and produce less yield, Adam and Eve would also struggle inwardly with sinful tendencies toward work. Laziness would be a new roadblock to productive labor and

[41]Michael Vlach, *He Will Reign Forever*: *A Biblical Theology of the Kingdom of God* (Silverton, OR: Lampion Press, 2017), 62: "Vlach comments, "As Middleton notes, 'the human creature is made to worship God in a distinctive way: by interacting with the earth, using our God-given power to transform our earthly environment into a complex world (a sociocultural world) that glorifies our creator.'"

the task of exercising dominion, and rather than join with other image-bearers in subduing the earth, people would subdue one another and exploit them for gain. Beyond these developments, a lack of clarity as to the purpose, place, and priority of work would pervade the disparate cultures.

The Continuation of Work

Although the fall and curse made work more difficult and occasionally futile, work remains a good, divinely bestowed gift and an essential aspect of human life. Indeed, early in the Genesis narrative we see image-bearers at work in various capacities, as Abel was a keeper of sheep and Cain a worker of the ground (Gen 4:1-2).[42]

Cain married and had children, and those children and grandchildren developed productive skills, while Cain himself exercised dominion by

[42]We need to note that the Bible's description of the origin and development of work runs contrary to popular, evolutionary-based treatments of the topic. The standard secular viewpoint is that work developed in distinct stages, becoming more and more sophisticated as humankind's brains developed. James Suzman comments, "Where most animal species have evolved a series of highly specialized capabilities honed over generations of natural selection, enabling them to exploit specific environments, our ancestors' shortcut this process by becoming progressively more plastic and more versatile. In other words, they became skilled at acquiring skills" (*Work: A Deep History From the Stone Age to the Age of Robots* [New York: Penguin, 2021], 81. Earlier Suzman notes that *"Homo sapiens* are by far the most prolific, expert, and versatile makers and users of tools in the history of life" (63). Naturalistic evolution is the underlying intellectual framework for this "history" of work. According to this framework, our work developed from less sophisticated to more sophisticated in correspondence with our growing intellectual capacities due to our growing brains. Thus, humanity begins as hunter-gatherers, then moves to farming and livestock management. Once over-production occurs, cities could be built which led to labor specialization and the creation of currency and capital markets. (See Jan Lucassen, *The Story of Work*: *A New History of Humankind* [New Haven: Yale University Press, 2021], 15-115 for a thorough description of this standard chronology.) Scripture directly contradicts this "history" of work and demonstrates, for example, that farming and livestock management existed alongside each other from the very beginning of creation, along with city building and many other forms of specialization and productivity. Employments and skills that historians and scientists attribute to later *Homo-sapiens* are found early in the Genesis narrative. Henry Morris comments, "Once again, it is significant to note that the elements which modern evolutionary archaeologists and anthropologists identify as the attributes of the emergence of evolving men from the stone age into true civilization—namely urbanization, agriculture, animal domestication, and metallurgy—all were accomplished quickly by the early decadents of Adam and did not take hundreds of thousands of years" (*The Genesis Record: A Scientific and Devotional Commentary on the Book of Beginnings* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1976], 146-47).

building a city (Gen 4:17). We also see a division of labor and skill specialization displayed early in the biblical narrative (Gen 4:20-22).[43] By the time God revealed himself to Noah and instructed him to build an ark, there would have been resources available to do such large-scale, sophisticated work: construction tools, measuring instruments, apparatus for lifting heavy items, implements for felling trees, and so on (see Gen 6:11-16).

After the flood, God instructed humanity to spread out across the globe and repopulate it with the divine image (Gen 9:1ff). Not heeding God's command to "fill the earth" (Gen 9:1), sinful humanity attempted to establish themselves in one location. In this act, humans used their God-given creative capacities for sinful purposes and built a city and a massive tower (Gen 11:1-4). In response to this sin, God dispersed the people who then spread out across the earth and formed various nations (Gen 11:6-9; see 10:1-32).

From this point on in the biblical narrative, we find humanity engaged in numerous productive employments. There are emperors (Gen 12:14; 41:1), servants (Gen 12:16; 41:37), herdsmen (Gen 13:8; 26:20), city builders (Gen 13:12), kings (Gen 14:1ff; 36:31), priests (Gen 14:18; Exod 2:16), army commanders (Gen 21:22), hunters (Gen 25:27), farmers (Gen 26:12), shepherdesses (Gen 29:9), traders (Gen 37:25), cupbearers (Gen 40:2), bakers (Gen 40:2), captains of the guard (Gen 40:3), governors (Gen 42:6), house stewards (Gen 44:1), keepers of livestock (Gen 46:34), taskmasters (Exod 1:11), midwives (Exod 1:15), shepherds (Exod 1:17), foremen (Exod 5:10), chariot drivers (Exod 14:18), horsemen (Exod 14:18), prophetesses (Exod 15:19), chiefs/judges (Exod 18:21-22), craftsmen (Ex 35:10; 36:1), engravers (Exod 38:23), designers (Exod 38:23), and embroiders (Exod 38:23), spies (Num 13:1), prophets (1 Sam 3:20), perfumers (1 Sam 8:13), cooks (1 Sam 8:13), messengers (1 Sam 23:27), musicians (2 Kings 3:15), national recorders (2 Sam 8:16), national secretaries (2 Sam 8:17), soldiers (1 Kings 20:39), bronze workers (1 Kings 7:14), skilled builders (Neh 3:1ff), temple servants (Neh 3:26), mighty men (Josh 8:3; Neh 11:14); military overseers (Neh 11:14), financial overseers (Neh 12:44); singers (Neh 12:45), gatekeepers (Neh 12:45); chiefs of staff (Esther 3:1); choirmasters (Ps 4:1); fishermen (Is 19:8), maids (Isa 24:2), carpenters (Isa 44:13; Mark 6:3), satraps (Dan 3:2), prefects (Dan 3:2), governors (Dan 3:2), counselors (Dan 3:2), treasurers (Dan 3:2), justices (Dan 3:2), magistrates (Dan 3:2), officials of provinces (Dan 3:2), centurions (Matt 8:5), pig herdsmen (Mark 5:14), innkeepers (Luke 10:35), tax-collectors (Luke 15:1), tanners (Acts 10:6), merchants (Acts 16:14), poets (Acts 17:28), tentmakers (Acts 18:3), sailors (Acts 27:27), physicians (Mark

[43]Specifically, Jabal was the father of those who dwelled in tents and had livestock (Gen 4:20). Jubal was the father of those who play the lyre and the pipe (Gen 4:21). Tubal-Cain was the forger of instruments of bronze and iron (Gen 4:22).

5:26), gardeners (John 20:15), teachers (Eph 4:12), evangelists (Eph 4:12), pastor-elders (1 Tim 3:1-8; 1 Pet 5:2), coppersmiths (2 Tim 4:4), lawyers (Titus 3:13), field laborers (James 5:4), and harvesters (James 5:4). Wives and mothers were productive in child-rearing, food acquisition and preparation, clothing procurement, home-management and decor, servant-oversight, wealth creation, hospitality, and affliction-care (Prov 31:10-31; see also 1 Tim 5:10).[44]

When God establishes Israel as a nation, he instructs them specifically on how to arrange and conduct their daily lives in relation to work (Ex 20:8-11). Specifically, the Israelites were to spend six days each week engaged in productive labor for their families and for the nation. As we've already noted, this work would have included many different occupations, all of which were necessary for the health and stability of Israel as a whole. God's people were to spend the bulk of their lives engaged in useful employments in their creation calling to subdue the earth and exercise dominion over it. This structure of the workweek is a direct reflection of God's own workweek: a six-to-one ratio of work to rest. The task of exercising dominion—what God created mankind to do—was to be the main part of a Jew's life.[45]

Work in the Proverbs

The Proverbs are an important set of writings for understanding the Old Testament's view toward work and productive labor. The book is built around the contrast between the wise man and the foolish man. The wise man lives according to the contours of creation and experiences earthly and spiritual blessings. The foolish man lives contrary to the way God has designed the world to function and, therefore, often finds himself in spiritual and temporal trouble. Given what we've already seen in the Old Testament, particularly in Genesis in relation to the doctrine of work, it should not

[44]Thank you to my students in my Theology of Work and Vocation course at The Cornerstone Bible College and Seminary for helping me expand and refine this list.

[45]Given what we see in Genesis 1-2 regarding humankind's design and calling, it should not surprise us that the remaining Old Testament narrative often speaks about work in a descriptive sense. Work is simply what humans do because they've been created to exercise dominion and subdue the earth in service to God. Large amounts of skillful work went into building the tabernacle (Exod 25-39) and the temple (1 Kings 5-6), as well as Solomon's own palace (1 Kings 7-9). Men and women worked (Judg 19:16; Ruth 2:19; 1 Sam 8:16), and, as we saw in the above list, engaged in many different occupations that served to exercise dominion over some aspect of God's creation. God told Israel to seek the Lord's blessing on all the "work of their hands" by being generous to their fellow Israelites, the sojourners, the orphans, and the widows (Deut 14:29; 15:10; 24:19) and obeying the Lord's commands (Deut 28:12).

surprise us that the wise man is characterized by diligence while the fool is known for his laziness.

God has so ordered the world that diligence leads to physical and spiritual enrichment (Prov 10:4; 13:4; 21:5; see also 24:30-34), leadership and growing responsibility (Prov 12:24), the enjoyment of earthly life (Prov 12:27), recognition for their growing skill and competency (Prov 22:29), and other temporal blessings. Laziness, however, leads to poverty (Prov 20:4), forced servitude (Prov 12:24), needless difficulty (Prov 15:9), and unfulfilled desires (Prov 13:4). The Proverbs encourage the believer within the covenant to pursue diligence and shun laziness by promising them positive outcomes for hard work and negative outcomes for laziness. The Proverbs also demonstrate God's concern for ethical business practices (Prov 11:1; see also 20:10; cf. Lev 19:35-36; Deut 26:13-14).

Work in Ecclesiastes

In the book of Ecclesiastes, Solomon offers some hard-earned wisdom on the value and place of work in the life of the believer.[46] He sought to find ultimate satisfaction and meaning in work and productivity (among other things), but he found that pursuing one's ultimate satisfaction in the creation only left him spiritually barren (Eccl 1:1-2:23). Once the Creator is brought back into the picture and earthly life is viewed in its proper place as a gift from God, Solomon concluded that it can be enjoyed with God's blessing.

Throughout Ecclesiastes Solomon exhorts his readers to enjoy earthly life (Eccl 2:24; 3:12-13, 22; 5:19; 8:15). One of the gifts of earthly life is work, for it is the place where one can exercise his God-given capacity for productive labor and enjoy the fruits of it. [47] In his final exhortation to believers to enjoy the blessings of earthly life, Solomon commands his readers to give serious effort to any endeavor they take up while they still have the time: "Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with your might" (Eccl 9:10). Commenting on this passage, Barrick writes, "Work forms a significant aspect of God-given joys."[48] Ecclesiastes teaches us that earthly toil is a blessing when it is conducted in the fear of God.

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[46]For a defense of the Solomonic authorship of Ecclesiastes, please see William D. Barrick, *Ecclesiastes: The Philippians of the Old Testament* (Ross-shire, Scotland: Focus, 2015), 17-23.

[47]Michael A. Eaton, *Ecclesiastes*, *TOTC* (Nottingham, England: Inter-Varsity, 2009), 86. Commenting on Ecclesiastes 2:24, Eaton writes, "The earthly realm is essentially good and meant for our enjoyment (cf. Gen 2:9). Similarly, human endeavor is to be enjoyed" (86).

[48]Barrick, *Ecclesiastes,* 162.

Work in the New Testament

As the Proverbs exhort the believer to shun laziness and pursue a life of holistic diligence, the New Testament just as strongly exalts diligence and chides the lazy person. In the Parable of the Talents, for example, Jesus describes the kingdom of heaven as a wealthy master who entrusts his portion of his estate to three servants (Matt 25:14). The master expected each of these servants to labor and multiply his assets so that the master might enjoy a solid return on his capital. The first two servants produced a 100% return on their master's assets and were commended for their diligence (Matt 25:15-23).

The third servant, however, hid his master's money in the ground and did nothing to multiply it, not even investing it with the bankers so that it might gain some interest. The third servant even attempted to blame his blunder on the master himself, claiming that he was afraid of the master's harsh and unjust ways. The master, however, saw through this fake excuse and exposed the real issue: the servant was wicked and lazy (Matt 25:26-27). The problem wasn't that the master was harsh and unmerciful, but that the servant was slothful. Consistently refusing to attend to our stewardship due to laziness is a serious offense and should, according to this passage, call into question the reality of our profession.

We also see the goodness of work affirmed by John the Baptist in his response to soldiers and tax collectors when they inquired about how repentance should be expressed in their lives. John tacitly acknowledged the legitimacy of their callings by instructing them about ethical behavior *within* their professions rather than encouraging them to *give up* their professions (Luke 3:10-14).

In his first letter to Timothy, Paul explains to his young protégé that pastors are to be hard workers who immerse themselves in their calling (1 Tim 4:15), labor like the hard-working farmer (2 Tim 2:6), and so prove themselves to be excellent craftsmen (2 Tim 2:15) who labor diligently for their Master. But Paul didn't suggest that pastoral ministry was the only profession that required diligence. Paul exhorted the Thessalonian lay people concerning work in both of his letters to this church.[49] In his first letter, the

[49]Many recent commentators connect the eschatological expectations addressed in the Thessalonians letters to the idleness of some of the church's members. That is, it is assumed that the idleness was due to the anticipation of Christ's second advent and the notion that one didn't need to work, but only wait for Christ to return. While this may have been the case, Paul himself doesn't make this connection explicit. (See Charles A. Wanamaker, *The Epistles to the Thessalonians*, *NIGTC* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990], 162). It is best to take the admonitions on their own terms and to recognize that there were idle professing Christians in Thessalonica just like there may be (and often are) in any church. The eschatological connection is not essential for a faithful interpretation and application of the text.

apostle exhorted the Christians in Thessalonica to conduct themselves quietly and respectfully, and to work diligently to remain financially independent of others (1 Thess 4:11-12). This kind of conduct was essential for the Thessalonian Christians to maintain a sound witness among unbelievers.[50]

In his second letter to the Thessalonians, Paul sharply rebukes those Christians in Thessalonica who refused to work and chose instead to live off the generosity of other believers.[51] Some folks were walking in idleness, and, because they were not busy in productive labor, they were becoming busybodies who meddled in people's business and frittered their time away (2 Thess 3:11), which likely led to greater ungodliness.

This pattern of idleness was not in accord with the example that Paul had given the Thessalonians. He reminds them, therefore, that although he had the right as an apostle to be supported by them for his ministry, he nevertheless labored to support himself and provide an example of godly diligence while relieving the church of any financial burden (2 Thess 3:6-9). Indeed, so serious was this need for active work that Paul warned the Christians in Thessalonica that those who refused to work were not allowed to eat—that is, they were not allowed to take food from those who *had* worked and earned their bread (2 Thess 3:10). Indeed, the church was to practice some measure of church discipline on those who remained in their sluggardly ways (2 Thess 3:14).

Good Works in the New Testament

The New Testament is clear that good works are an essential aspect of the

[50]Interestingly, Paul tells the Thessalonians to "make it their aim" to live a life of quiet diligence and hard work. Paul uses this same expression (φιλοτιμέομαι) in 2 Corinthians 5:9 where he says he "*makes it [his] aim* to please the Lord" and Romans 15:20 where he "*make[s] it [his] ambition* to preach the gospel" where it has not yet been preached. We might understand the admonition to make it our aim to preach the gospel or to please the Lord. These exhortations sound right. But, to make it our aim in life to work well and live quietly? That sounds like a recipe for mediocrity. Not for Paul. He was rooted in the biblical doctrine of creation and therefore recognized that careful attention to our calling to exercise dominion through productive labor was pleasing to God and a way we demonstrated faithfulness.

[51]While Wanamaker argues that the likely reason why some were idle and living off other Christians was due to a patron-client relationship that was common in the Greco-Roman world Wanamaker, (see *The Epistles to the Thessalonians*, 284), Weima is right to observe that we have insufficient evidence to draw any firm conclusion why some in Thessalonica were idle and refusing to work (Jeffery A. D. Weima, *1-2 Thessalonians*, *BECNT* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 2014], 298). Similar to the alleged eschatological connection, we don't need to know the reasons why some Thessalonian Christians refused to work, but only that they were idle and that this practice is not acceptable for Christians.

Christian life (Matt 5:16). Paul exhorts believers, both men and women, explicitly and implicitly, to be rich in good works (1 Tim 2:10; 5:10; 5:25; 6:18; Titus 2:7, 14; 3:8, 14), reminding them that this is precisely what they were made for (Eph 2:10; Titus 2:14). These good works are distinct from teaching (Titus 2:7)—that is, they consist in fulfilling temporal needs—and often occur within one's work environment (Eph 6:8; cf. Eph 2:10).

To underscore this last point, we should observe that the word "good" (ἀγαθόν) used in Ephesians 6:8 is the same word in the phrase "good works" throughout the New Testament. Paul reminds the servant that whatever "good" he does in obedience to his earthly master will be rewarded by his heavenly Master. This "good," therefore, is conducted in the servant's work setting and is thus not a "religious" work in the sense that it is not done within the context of the church or to achieve some higher, "spiritual" goal. What we have learned already, however, is that this normal, everyday labor *is* religious in the sense that it fulfills our calling to serve the Lord through exercising dominion (Gen 1:26-31; 2:15; Col 3:23). This is why Paul prefaces his reminder about rewards with an exhortation to labor for Christ in our work (Eph 6:5-7). Ever since the creation of the world, God has always intended that earthly work would be service unto him.

Theological Formulation

Drawing from this biblical data, we can now define work. *Human work is the God-given task of joyfully exercising dominion over and subduing the earth in an effective and productive manner for our personal benefit and the benefit of our fellow image-bearers*. Notice that this definition does not restrict work to income-producing activities. Income-generating work is a subset of our task to exercise dominion over and subdue the earth. The implication, then, is that a mother of four who cares for her home and her children is working just as much as her husband is, for they are both exercising dominion in their respective spheres and reflecting their Creator (cf. Gen 2:15; 3:16-18; Prov 31:10-31; 1 Tim 5:9-11).

Lester DeKoster rightly defines work as, "the form in which we make ourselves useful to others."[52] This definition can apply to both income-generating endeavors *and* nonremunerative activities. Abraham Kuyper helpfully comments, "Thus when we speak in this context of our vocation, we must understand it in the sense of *all* regular activity to which we daily must devote our time and our strength, whether in a steady job, with or without wages, outside the home, or within the domestic sphere."[53] Work is any productive venture we undertake in our aim to exercise dominion as

[52] DeKoster, *Work*, 1.

[53] Abraham Kuyper, *Common Grace: God's Gifts for a Fallen World*, vol. 2 (Bellingham, WA: Lexham, 2019), 258.

God's image-bearers and reflect our Creator. From our biblical investigation we can also draw the following theological conclusions.

Work is a Gift to Enjoy, not Merely a Burden to Bear

While the fall and curse have made work difficult and occasionally fruitless, it remains a vital part of God's good creation. Work, therefore, is a source of legitimate satisfaction and pleasure for God's redeemed image-bearers. Like God, we were made with the capacity to step back from our completed tasks and breathe a word of satisfied accomplishment: "Behold, it was very good" (Gen 1:31). In Christ, Christian men and women should not feel guilty about deriving satisfaction and joy from their work, for that is precisely what they were created for.

Given the reality of the fall and the curse, however, we must be careful not to overly romanticize work. There are some employments that are downright awful, and there will be seasons in which the curse will be felt more acutely than others.[54] Wise pastoral ministries, therefore, will help people navigate seasons of work that are more difficult and less satisfying while upholding, at all times, the inherent goodness of work and our responsibility to pursue excellence in it for the glory of God and the good our neighbor.

Scripture Undermines a Sacred-Secular Dichotomy

Scripture undermines a sacred-secular dichotomy by classifying all legitimate employments as service unto God. In Christ, the redeemed image-bearer can again serve his Creator in his work if it is (1) a legitimate calling (1 Thess 5:22); and (2) done in faith (Rom 14:23). The pastor or missionary is not serving in a profession that is more pleasing to God, or one that places them within a sphere of grace that is inaccessible to the non-vocational Christian. Work, then, is a means to deepening spirituality and one's walk with God, not a hindrance to it.

The Capacity to Work is Fundamental to Being Human

The capacity for productive labor in subduing the earth and exercising dominion is a basic aspect of our human personhood and a direct reflection of being made in the image of God. For this reason, the Bible consistently exalts diligence and chastises laziness. This last point will be crucial as we consider how a theology of work will be a valuable resource in counseling. Cultivating a biblical view toward work must be a central aspect of Christian discipleship.

[54]See my article, "De-Romanticizing our Theology of Work," at With All Wisdom, November 12, 2022, https://withallwisdom.org/2022/11/14/de-romanticizing-our-theology-of-work/.

III
Theology Applied:
Discipleship, Counseling, Retirement, Poverty, and Economics

Having examined the Scripture and drawn our theological conclusions, we are now in a place to apply this theology to our ecclesial and cultural setting. We will consider three areas that pertain specifically to the church (discipleship, counseling, and retirement) and two that relate to the wider culture (poverty relief and economics). Given space constraints, we will only be able to touch on each of these topics. Nevertheless, we will see that work plays an essential role in thinking biblically about each area.

Discipleship and a Theology of Work

As I've noted above, instructing Christians on how to rightly understand work is a central task of discipleship. We will likely find many Christians in our midst who have developed a sacred-secular split in their thinking about work. It's possible that some of the members in our congregations simply assume that their daily work is not as pleasing to God or important as the explicitly spiritual activity they do at the church or on the mission field. Such a view will inevitably create a kind of cognitive dissonance because, by necessity, most of their time and energy will be expended on their daily work and not on strictly "spiritual" activities like evangelism, Bible studies, corporate worship, and missions work. What they do with most of their time, they conclude, is not *really* what they should be doing with most of their time. Pastors, therefore, must make a theology of work a top priority in their discipleship.

Of what should this discipleship consist? At the very least it must consist of providing our people with a robust biblical theology on work. It is not enough to merely exhort our people to do all their work heartily unto the Lord (Col 3:23). If they are laboring under a sacred-secular approach to their work, such exhortations may only deepen a growing cognitive dissonance if they assume their daily work is useful inasmuch as it leads to superior, spiritual ends. Nor should our people only be warned of the dangers of idolizing their work.[55] Our people need to be taught that their vocation is the primary place we exercise faithfulness [56] and is itself a gift, not a mere means

[55]Bahnsen is concerned that many pastors approach the topic of work primarily from a standpoint of warning rather than positive teaching and encouragement. "But a creational theology about work (and wealth) is largely absent in today's church, replaced by safe, facile decrial of the 'idolatry' of work. A latent dualism that pits the Kingdom of. God against our productive labors on earth prevails" (*Full Time*, 18).

[56]Michael Horton, *Ordinary: Sustainable Faith in a Radical, Restless World* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014), 142: Horton observes, "Once we recover a greater sense

to get other gifts.[57] Paul's New Testament exhortations concerning work are built upon the Old Testament teaching about the goodness of the creation, man's calling to exercise dominion, and the Old Testament's affirmation of the dignity of work. Paul's New Testament instructions, therefore, cannot be removed from this canonical context and reduced to platitudinal advice to help people get through their workweek.

Also, because work is rooted in our design and calling to exercise dominion and subdue the earth for the glory of God, it must be defined more broadly than just "that which produces income." Women who remain fulltime at home with children and manage the household are working in the same way that their husbands are working (i.e., exercising dominion), only in a different domain than their husbands.[58] For both men and women, work is a central component of Christian discipleship.

Counseling and a Theology of Work

Given how fundamental our capacity to work is to our humanity, we will often find that a failure to fulfill this calling leads to aimlessness and depression. While there are other factors that may give rise to or aggravate one's depression, failure to engage in useful labor will inevitably negatively affect one's happiness and satisfaction with life. In some cases, slothfulness may be the *primary* cause of depression.[59] If such is the case, then, pastors

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of God's ordinary vocation as the site of his faithfulness, we will begin to appreciate our own calling and love and serve others in his name in everyday ways that make a real difference in people's lives."

[57]David Gibson, *Living Life Backwards: How Ecclesiastes Teaches us to Live in Light of the End* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2017), 129-30. Gibson writes, "We often think that we have our life, and God gives us his gifts, and we now have to use God's gifts to experience further rewards. So God gives us the gift of food, drink, work, and friendship, and we think we have to use those things to obtain extra rewards. We use work to get the gift of wealth and success. No, says the Preacher [of Ecclesiastes], your work is itself a gift simply to enjoy, regardless of whether it makes you rich or not." See also Traeger and Gilbert, *The Gospel at Work,* 39.

[58]Paul instructs the older women to teach the younger women to be "workers at home" (Titus 2:5; οἰκουργοὺς). The woman in Proverbs is highly productive in serving others for their benefit. She creates useful items for the home and for others (Prov 31:13, 18), procures food for her household (31:14) as well as clothing (31:21) and pleasing décor for the home (31:22); she engages in business (31:16, 18, 24) and viticulture (31:16). In the New Testament, Paul instructed Timothy to only consider widows as worthy of support if they were (1) older than sixty; (2) faithful to their husband during their marriage; (3) without support from family; and (4) known for good works. Those good works included raising children, showing hospitality, washing the feet of saints, and caring for the afflicted (1 Tim 5:9-10).

[59]Adams, *Competent to Counsel*, 143-44. Psychologist James Dobson tells a humorous story of a time when he and his wife took a two-week vacation at home in which

must make diligent attention to one's work one of the main remedies they employ to help counselees find their way out of the throes of depression.

Similarly, diligence in one's work may also help with one's assurance of salvation. We saw in the Parable of the Talents that Jesus classified the servant who refused to multiply his master's wealth as a wicked and lazy slave whose fate was eternal judgment (Matt 25:26-30). The conclusion we must draw, then, is that those who neglect the gifts and resources Christ has given them will likely suffer from a continual lack of assurance, not because they must secure their salvation by works, but because laziness is what characterizes an unbeliever. To remain in a perpetual state of sloth and neglect of the gifts and resources God has entrusted to us will erode our assurance of salvation.[60] A wise pastoral counselor will help struggling counselees see the connection between their low spiritual states and their misuse of the gifts, opportunities, and resources that God has given them.

Retirement and a Theology of Work

While there will always be demographic differences between churches, we can be sure that our congregations will consist of some—and perhaps many—people who are on the precipice of retirement or who are currently in retirement. It will be our responsibility, therefore, to instruct our people to view their retirement through a biblical lens rather than a cultural one.

Due to historically unprecedented amounts of national wealth and higher life expectancies, retirement is commonly seen in America as the time in which a person stops working to enjoy the last two decades of their life in relative ease, recreation, and the pursuit of personal interests. While

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they aimed to do "nothing" except to stay at home and rest. "We had been moving at such a frantic pace and thought it would be fun to sleep late every day and just 'dink around.'" Dobson and his wife, however, didn't experience the satisfaction they thought they would. "What a disappointment. Both of us nearly went crazy. We had the 'blahs' and walked around wondering what to do next. I even spent several dreary afternoons watching daytime television. That will drive anyone bonkers. I realized from that experience that work is integrally related to my sense of well-being and that doing nothing wasn't nearly as fun as I expected" (*Bringing Up Boys* [Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 2001], 238).

[60]John Owen, *Temptation and Sin*, in *The Works of John Owen*, vol. 6 (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth), 346. John Owen wisely observes, "Great opportunities for service neglected and great gifts not improved are often times the occasion of plunging the soul into great depths. Gifts are given to trade withal for God. Opportunities are the market-days for trade. To napkin up the one and to let slip the other will end in trouble and disconsolation. *Disquietments and perplexities of heart are worms that will certainly breed in the rust of unexercised gifts.* God loseth a revenue of glory and honour by such slothful souls and he will make them sensible of it" (346).

retirement as such is not an unbiblical concept,[61] the American version of it certainly is.[62] Although age, illness, and flagging physical strength may require us to slow the pace of our work, nowhere does Scripture give the impression that we should ever *stop working*. Building upon the Genesis narrative and our design by God to be workers, pastors must ever teach their people that retirement from one's job shouldn't lead them to stop working but rather to a different kind of work.

Even if some Christians are in a position where they no longer need an income, they should recognize that the calling to exercise dominion and subdue the earth remains in place during their whole Christian pilgrimage (Gen 1:26-31). Christ died for the specific purpose of creating a people who are zealous for good works (Titus 2:14). If our people are relieved of the need to earn an income, we should encourage them to find profitable labor elsewhere, both inside and outside the church, and to strenuously resist the urge to fill up their later years with recreation, travel, and self-centered pursuits.[63]

Poverty Relief and a Theology of Work

In these latter two areas of application, we will broaden beyond the church and touch upon issues that are found in our greater society for the sake of helping our people follow Christ's command to be salt and light to a decaying and dark world (Matt 5:13-16). The first issue is poverty relief.

Scripture tells us that God has a special concern for the poor (1 Sam 2:8; Ps 12:5; 14:6; 35:10; 72:4). He embedded provisions for the poor into Israel's law (Ex 22:25; 23:3; Lev 14:21; 19:5; 24:47-48; 25:25; Deut 24:6; 10-14) and promised to bless those who were generous to the poor (Prov 14:21; 19:17; 22:9; 28:27). Concern for the poor continues into the New Testament as we see Jesus rebuking the religious leaders for taking advantage of the poor

[61]For example, God required the Levitical priests to retire at age fifty, presumably because of the physical rigor of their jobs (see Num 8:25).

[62]Adams comments: "Retirement, as it is currently conceived, is not a biblical option. Indeed, because God made man with the capacity to receive a satisfaction that comes through work, and through work alone (cf. Ecclesiastes 5:12), every person needs to work so long as he lives. His work may be remunerative or nonremunerative, but he must work" (*Shepherding God's Flock*, 269). Christians who are entering the "retirement" phase of life must be taught to keep working and find alternative areas of usefulness that make use of the gifts they honed during their career. Retirement years are also an ideal time to devote more time to discipleship (see Titus 2:1ff).

[63]For more on a biblical view of retirement, see Haanan, *An Uncommon Guide to Retirement*; C. J. Cagle, *Reimagine Retirement: Planning and Living for the Glory of God* (Nashville: B & H, 2019) and Derek Brown and Cliff McManis, *What the Bible Says About Retirement* (Cupertino, CA: With All Wisdom, 2022).

(Luke 20:45-21:9) and the church caring for the poor among her members (Acts 4:34; Rom 15:26; Gal 2:10; 1 John 3:17). The New Testament exhorts Christians to do good to all people (1 Thess 5:15), while making the church the priority (Gal 6:10). This "doing good" certainly includes helping the poor.

While this is not the place for a full-orbed theology of poverty care, we can draw a clear connection between work and poverty relief. While some will use the Bible to advocate for a kind of Christian socialism, the truth is that Scripture does not advocate, either exegetically or theologically, the redistribution of wealth as a primary means of poverty relief.

For example, God provided for the impoverished in the nation by instructing his people to allow the poor to glean from their crops (Lev 19:10; 23:22). This provision, however, required the poor to gather their food through the work of gleaning, not effortless, passive collecting. Also, the poor were never allowed to ransack a field and harm their fellow Israelites' land (Deut 23:24-25).[64] In situations where poverty was due to factors out of a person's control (i.e., natural disasters, injury, loss of work), believers were to supply their brothers freely and unbegrudgingly with what they needed. But whenever a person could work, they were required to work for their living. Paul made this point clear when he wrote to the Thessalonians that those who refused to work could not have free access to food. "If anyone is not willing to work, let him not eat" (2 Thess 3:10; see also 1 Thess 4:11-12).

Poverty has many causes that are outside a particular person's control (e.g., injustice, natural disasters). But there are also several causes of poverty that are within a person's control, such as hedonism (Prov 21:17; 23:21), laziness (Prov 10:4; 20:13), hastiness (Prov 21:5), stinginess (Prov 28:22), and worthless pursuits (Prov 28:19). [65] Poverty solutions, therefore, should aim to account for and remedy the specific categories of poverty and should avoid indiscriminate charity. When we merely seek to "gratify the benevolent feelings of our hearts," we will be "laying the foundation of a greater moral evil."[66] Indiscriminate giving leads to the perpetuation of poverty because it creates dependence rather than teaching healthy independence through work and wisdom.

The gospel helps to alleviate poverty by changing the hearts of the oppressors to act justly (see James 5:4), those who have wealth to be generous (1 Tim 6:17-19), and those who are lazy and lack self-control to work hard

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[64]Walter C. Kaiser, "Poverty and the Poor in the Old Testament," in *The Least of These: A Biblical Answer to Poverty*, eds. Anne Bradley and Art Lindsey (Grand Rapids: WestBow, 2014), 42-43.

[65] Homelessness in America can be caused by tragedy and injustice, but it is most often caused by other factors, including voluntary homelessness out of preference, drug addiction, and avoidance of obligations. See Marvin Olasky, *The Tragedy of American Compassion* (Washington, D. C., Regnery, 1992), 210, 226.

[66]Olasky, *The Tragedy of American Compassion*, 48.

and create a surplus to share with others (Eph 4:28).[67] Furthermore, given the nature of our design to be workers and God's aim for us to provide for ourselves through our work, poverty care should be fundamentally work-based. [68] The poor are provided with greater dignity when they are able to exercise dominion and accomplish good things. [69]

Economics and a Theology of Work

Economics has to do with the *production, distribution, and consumption of goods and services*. Given this definition, it should become immediately apparent that economics is an essential component of our lives and that work is an essential feature of a healthy economy. Indeed, you cannot have economic activity without the production of goods and services that only happens through work, nor can you have a *healthy* economy without a sound theology of work.[70] For this reason, Christians should also be concerned about issues like unemployment, [71] quiet quitting,[72] Bare Minimum Mondays,[73] and calls by

[67]See also David Kotter, "Remember the Poor: A New Testament Perspective on the Problems of Poverty, Riches, and Redistribution," in *For the Least of These*, 80.
[68]Kaiser, "Poverty and the Poor," 48.
[69]Wayne Grudem, *Christian Ethics: An Introduction to Biblical Moral Reasoning*, (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2018), 968-69. Work-based poverty solutions for able-bodied people also help people avoid the natural tendency to laziness and dependency upon free resources (Grudem, *Ethics*, 967).
[70]An economy can only be healthy to the degree that those involved in it have a robust view of work (other factors are required, but this is essential). In November 2021, Bahnsen noted his concern that Covid was having a detrimental effect on people's view of work, which, in turn, would have a detrimental effect on the economy. See Nick Eicher's interview with Bahnsen at "Moneybeat: Public policy, jobs, and problems of culture," *World Magazine*, November 11, 2021, https://wng.org/podcasts/moneybeat-public-policy-jobs-and-problems-of-culture-1637558304.
[71]Joe Carter, "What Christians Should Know About Unemployment," at Acton Institute, June 5, 2014, https://rlo.acton.org/archives/69487-christians-know-unemployment.html. Carter comments, "Because jobs can serve the needs of our neighbors and lead to human flourishing both for the individual and communities, they are the most important part of a morally functioning economy. For most of us, the work we do at our jobs is the primary way we serve our neighbor. It is also a way that we glorify God."
[72]Anthony C. Klotz and Mark C. Bolino, "When Quiet Quitting is Worse than the Real Thing," in *Harvard Business Review*, September 15, 2022, https://hbr.org/2022/09/when-quiet-quitting-is-worse-than-the-real-thing, accessed Jun 5, 2024.
[73]Bare Minimum Mondays is a workplace trend where employees do the least amount of work possible on their first day back from the weekend.

politicians for four-day workweeks.[74]

Framing economics in explicitly biblical terms, the economy is the place in which human beings carry out their calling as image-bearers to exercise dominion and subdue the earth. The local and global production, distribution, and consumption of goods and services occur precisely because we were made to create goods and services *for* other image-bearers and to receive *from* our neighbors the goods and services they provide. Business, production, and industry should all be inherently interesting to the Christian because these are the places of human activity where man fulfills his calling to work.[75]

Beyond being an area of stimulating intellectual interest, the primary reason Christians should care about the economy is because the economy relates directly to our calling to subdue and steward this earth. If an economy is structured in such a way that it inhibits or discourages our calling to exercise dominion, engage in productive labor, and steward the earth, then Christians should be the first to take notice, not because we are infatuated with money, but because we know how God has designed the world to function.[76] This means that Christians can rightly desire their nation's general prosperity. While it is true that our nation's material prosperity is not *all* that Christians should concern themselves with, it is a legitimate area of concern and prayer, for God designed the world with the potential for significant prosperity and has linked this prosperity to our calling to exercise dominion. As Grudem observes, economic prosperity is presented in Scripture as something good, not something evil.[77] Work is also fundamentally good, and a way that we push back against the curse. Conversely, it is *not good* to allow the curse to spread unchecked. [78]

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[74]Bernie Sanders, "It's time for a 4-day work week," at CNN, April 3, 2024, https://www.cnn.com/2024/04/03/opinions/32-hour-work-week-sanders/index.html, accessed April 3, 2024.

[75]Paul Marshall notes that Calvin saw "commerce" (i.e., economic activity) as a "natural way for people to commune with one another" ("Calvin, Politics, and Political Science," in *Calvin and Culture: Exploring a Worldview*, eds. David W. Hall and Marvin Padgett (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R: 2010), 153.

[76]Related to the structure of a given economy and the policies that have a direct bearing on the economy, pastors should help their people recognize that economic models and policies are built on assumptions about the existence and providence of God, the purpose and goodness of creation, the nature and purpose of humankind, the reality of sin, the dignity of work and private property, the role of government, the direction of history, and how to effectively care for the poor. Each of these categories are deeply theological. If economic policies are established that are not rooted in reality, they will eventually become counter-productive, even harmful.

[77]Grudem, *Ethics*, 944-45.

[78]Grudem, *Business for the Glory of God*, 29.

IV
Conclusion

Pastors must equip their people with a robust theology of work. Due to our design as God's image-bearers and our calling to exercise dominion, work is an essential aspect of our humanity and thus an essential aspect of Christian discipleship. It is likely that some, if not many, people in our congregations harbor deficient views toward work and hyper-spiritualized views toward vocational ministry. Others may need instruction on avoiding idleness and laziness and using their God-given skills to serve others through their work. Those in our congregation who have a hand in forming policies that relate to poverty care and the local and national economy need theological instruction that ties these two societal issues directly to a theology of work.

As our people see more and more that they were created by God to reflect him as a worker and redeemed in Christ to be zealous for good works (Titus 2:14), they will find more abiding satisfaction and fruitfulness in their daily labors. This will redound to God's glory and their joy and serve as a powerful witness to a watching world.