

Why Are You Here? Heavenly Work vs. Earthly Work

GREGG R. ALLISON

Gregg R. Allison is Professor of Christian theology at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. Dr. Allison served many years as a staff member of Campus Crusade, where he worked in campus ministry and as a missionary to Italy and Switzerland. He also serves as the Secretary of the Evangelical Theological Society and the book review editor for theological, historical, and philosophical studies for the Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society. Dr. Allison is the author of several books, including *Historical Theology: An Introduction to Christian Doctrine* (Zondervan, 2011), *Sojourners and Strangers: The Doctrine of the Church* (Crossway, 2012), and *Roman Catholic Theology and Practice: An Evangelical Assessment* (Crossway, 2014).

OVERVIEW

This brief article examines the nature of human work from a biblical and theological perspective. Creation frames human work because God created humans as his image bearers, giving them the task of building civilization through procreation and vocation. But humanity's purposeful work became cursed work through sin. Now the gospel transforms and restores our work as Christians, allowing us to display God's glory in both our "heavenly" work and our "earthly" work. We must resist the temptation to elevate the spiritual over the physical, as Greek philosophers, the Roman Catholic Church, and many evangelicals have tended to do, and instead insist that God can be equally glorified in all legitimate callings and vocations. This article is not an exhaustive treatment of this theme, but offers an outline of work within a biblical and theological framework.

PURPOSEFUL WORK

The first chapters of Scripture present a creational framework for the heavens and the earth and everything that exists in them. Genesis 1:1 is the overarching statement of divine creation. Not with already existing materials, but out of nothing, the eternally existing triune God—Father, Son, Holy Spirit—created the universe and everything in it. Genesis 1:2-25 narrates the details of the sequenced creation, each creative work building on the next, moving from the context (space and time) to inorganic matter (light, water, land, sun and moon, planets, moons, and stars) to organic life (plants, vegetation, fruit trees, fish, birds, animals, livestock, reptiles, amphibians). These days of creation present everything being brought into existence in anticipation of something greater: God was preparing a space that would be hospitable for the climax of his creation, an earth that this created highlight would inhabit.

Indeed, in his final act of creation, God created human beings in his image (Gen 1:26-27). By divine design, human beings as image bearers are created beings that are more like God than any other creatures. They are to reflect and represent God in the world in which they live. And they do so as holistic human beings consisting of reason/intellect, emotions and attitudes, a volitional faculty, a material aspect/body, moral capabilities, motivations and purposing, relationships, activities, and the like. God created human beings in their wholeness to be his image bearers. As Chris Rice presents it,

Lying on pillows we're haunted and half-awake
Does anyone hear us pray, "If I die before I wake"
Then the morning comes and the mirror's the other place
Where we wrestle face to face with the image of Deity
The image of Deity.¹

To the male human being and the female human being so created, God directed this specific mandate: "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth" (Gen 1:28). Accordingly, as it does for all created realities, creation frames human work. God created his image bearers for a particular function. This purpose

is commonly called the “creation mandate.” It is the responsibility to build human civilization.

Specifically, this human responsibility consists of two aspects: procreation and vocation. As for the first aspect, human beings are to “be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth.” Thus, the vast majority of human beings will be married, and the vast majority of those married couples will generate children. While much of contemporary Western society mocks the idea of genderedness, heterosexual marriage, and child-raising, Frederica Mathewes-Green humorously rebukes us:

For large segments of the world, gender differences are pleasant, appealing, and enjoyable, and practical application of theory—reproduction itself—is hardly a chore. (The subtitle of a Dave Barry book put it winningly: “How to make a tiny person in only nine months, with tools you probably have around the home.”) Yes, most cultures note and highlight gender differences, because most people find them delightful, as well as useful in producing the next generation.²

Procreation is a divinely designed and mandated responsibility, and its fulfillment is filled with joy.

In terms of the second aspect, human beings are to “subdue [the earth], and have dominion over” it. Thus, human beings are to engage in work. The particular place that God designed for the beginning of this civilization building was the garden of Eden: “The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to work it and keep it” (Gen 2:15). Joined by Eve, with whom he would begin to expand the human race through procreation and to build human society through vocation, Adam would carry out the task of “Edenizing” the world—enlarging the small space and society into all the parts of the world. Genesis 4 presents the beginning of the fulfillment of this mandate:

Now Adam knew Eve his wife, and she conceived and bore Cain, saying, “I have gotten a man with the help of the LORD.” And again, she bore his brother Abel. Now Abel was a keeper of sheep, and Cain a worker of the ground (Gen 4:1-2).

Here is both procreation and vocation. And it continues:

Cain knew his wife, and she conceived and bore Enoch. When he built a city, he called the name of the city after the name of his son, Enoch. To Enoch was born Irad, and Irad fathered Mehujael, and Mehujael fathered Methushael, and Methushael fathered Lamech. And Lamech took two wives. The name of the one was Adah, and the name of the other Zillah. Adah bore Jabal; he was the father of those who dwell in tents and have livestock. His brother's name was Jubal; he was the father of all those who play the lyre and pipe. Zillah also bore Tubal-cain; he was the forger of all instruments of bronze and iron (Gen 4:17-22).

Again, human beings engage in both procreation—"she conceived," "he fathered"—and vocation: shepherding, farming, city building, tending livestock, musical artistry, tool making. Genesis narrates the initial fulfillment of the original mandate to human beings to be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it and exercise dominion over all other earthly creatures.

To contemporize the ongoing fulfillment of this divine mandate, human beings build civilization through generating (reproducing and raising) about 130,000,000 new human beings each year and by engaging in politics, education, business, construction, arts, athletics, science and technology, economics, agriculture and food preparation, clothing and fashion, city planning, and much more. Human beings, as beings created in the image of God, are designed for procreation and vocation and are given the responsibility to build the "city of man."

CURSED WORK

The original creation as just recounted became cursed. The rebellion of the first human beings against God affected not only Adam and Eve, but had repercussions on the entire human race that arose from them as well as the entire created order:

For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him [God] who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now (Rom. 8:20-22).

God pronounced specific curses on Adam and Eve immediately following their rebellion (Gen 3:14-19); they can be summarized as: (1) *Cursed procreation*: In the ongoing fulfillment of the first aspect of responsibility to build civilization, human reproduction after the fall is characterized by hard labor, premature births, stillborn babies, infertility, miscarriages, genetic malformation, SIDS, and more. Child-raising also faces many challenges prompted by the fall: bad parental examples, peer pressure, child molestation, incestuous relationships, disrespect for parental authority, rebellion, and more. (2) *Cursed vocation*: The original fertile, bountiful creation is now characterized by resistance to fruitfulness because of drought, insect infestation, and depletion of nutrients due to excessive cultivation, freezing and excessive heat, tornadoes, hurricanes, monsoons, and other natural disasters. Accordingly, in the ongoing fulfillment of the second aspect of the responsibility to build civilization, human vocation after the fall is characterized by hard labor. As the divine curse was expressed to Adam, “By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread, till you return to the ground . . .” (Gen 3:19).

(3) *Cursed space*: Though the original place that God designed for the beginning of this civilization building was the garden of Eden, the fall spelled banishment from this safe haven: “the LORD God sent him [Adam, as including Eve] out from the garden of Eden to work the ground from which he was taken. He drove out the man, and at the east of the garden of Eden he placed the cherubim and a flaming sword that turned every way to guard the way to the tree of life” (Gen 3:23-24). Exiled from Eden, human beings are consigned to be wanderers in a space that was designed to be their home, yet always has a foreign feel to it. As human beings “interplay with their environment ... this interplay takes the form of robbery ... [L]ife is robbery.”³ Outside of Eden, human beings live in a cursed space that steals their very existence from them as they are constantly faced with anxieties, failures, troubles, temptations, demonic attacks, and a host of other evils. (4) *Cursed human beings*: Beyond procreational, vocational, and spatial curses due to the fall into sin, from Adam and Eve to all of people today, human beings are cursed. We are wasting away under guilt before God and suffering the corruption of our nature. We are enemies of God, alienated from him. We are competitors with one another rather than cooperating compatriots. We are self-centered, self-deceived people. And we live in a broken creation.

Accordingly, much of our human work originates and develops in reaction

to this corrupted, tainted reality. Human vocation must intervene to minimize or relieve misery, poverty, marginalization, injustice, crime, financial failure, sickness, addictions, family breakdown, and much more. To contemporize the ongoing fulfillment of the divine mandate for vocation, human beings work hard to provide hurricane relief, combat the AIDS epidemic, seek cures for cancer, provide clothes for refugees, feed the hungry, fight against genocide, teach the illiterate to read, protest government corruption, champion (biblically sanctioned) human rights, and other examples of compassionate intervention.

RESTORED WORK

The motto of Sojourn Community Church, where I am a pastor, is “the gospel changes everything.” The salvation accomplished by Jesus Christ through his death and resurrection, as it is applied by the Word of God and the Spirit of God, provides cursed human beings with a new status (justification), a new nature (regeneration), a new identity (union with Christ, beautifully portrayed in baptism as being dead to the old existence and alive to a new existence), a new family (adoption, and baptism with the Holy Spirit, by which Christ incorporates us into his body, the church, which celebrates the Lord’s Supper as family fellowship), a new direction (sanctification), and a new hope (assurance of salvation, and perseverance).

As prompting an all-encompassing transformation, the gospel changes our work as well. John the Baptist, who preached repentance in anticipation of Jesus the Messiah, was intensely pointed about this restored work:

And the crowds asked him, “What then shall we do?” And he answered them, “Whoever has two tunics is to share with him who has none, and whoever has food is to do likewise.” Tax collectors also came to be baptized and said to him, “Teacher, what shall we do?” And he said to them, “Collect no more than you are authorized to do.” Soldiers also asked him, “And we, what shall we do?” And he said to them, “Do not extort money from anyone by threats or by false accusation, and be content with your wages” (Luke 3:10-14).

Being generous in sharing with others in need, collecting the proper amount of taxes, avoiding extortion by harassment, and living with contentment are

new attitudes and new work habits effected by the gospel. As Paul expresses this transformation, “Let the thief no longer steal, but rather let him labor, doing honest work with his own hands, so that he may have something to share with anyone in need” (Eph 4:28). Thus, the gospel that rescues us from guilt before God, reconciles us with him so that we are no longer enemies but beloved friends, redeems us from our alienation from God by making us his people, mends our broken human relationships, changes us from self-centeredness to Christ-centeredness, and more—this gospel also transforms and restores human work in at least three concrete ways.

First, this gospel renewal moves people from a human-centered motivation to a God-centered motivation. Paul applies this new incentive to the vocational attitudes and activities of bondslaves, or employees, and masters, or employers:

Bondservants, obey in everything those who are your earthly masters, not by way of eye-service, as people-pleasers, but with sincerity of heart, fearing the Lord. Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward. You are serving the Lord Christ. For the wrongdoer will be paid back for the wrong he has done, and there is no partiality (Col 3:22-25).

Masters, treat your bondservants [employees] justly and fairly, knowing that you also have a Master in heaven (Col 4:1).

Because of the gospel, employees are conscious of belonging to Jesus Christ and thus work hard as serving him, their divine Lord, even as they work hard for their earthly bosses. The same holds true for employers, whose consciousness of belonging to Jesus Christ entails just and fair treatment of their employees. Thus, the gospel restores work by giving workers a new motivation.

Second, this gospel renewal transforms people from consumers to contributors. Paul notes this remarkable change in his rebuke of Christians who are lazy idlers:

Now we command you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you keep away from any brother who is walking in idleness and not in accord

with the tradition that you received from us. For you yourselves know how you ought to imitate us, because we were not idle when we were with you, nor did we eat anyone's bread without paying for it, but with toil and labor we worked night and day, that we might not be a burden to any of you. It was not because we do not have that right, but to give you in ourselves an example to imitate. For even when we were with you, we would give you this command: If anyone is not willing to work, let him not eat. For we hear that some among you walk in idleness, not busy at work, but busybodies. Now such persons we command and encourage in the Lord Jesus Christ to do their work quietly and to earn their own living (2 Thess. 3:6-12).

Paul demanded that Christians work hard and pointed to himself as an example of such labor. Such hard work is not just for the sake of earning a living so as to provide for oneself. It is also to provide for one's family, with this startling warning: "But if anyone does not provide for his relatives, and especially for members of his household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever" (1 Tim 5:8). Thus, the gospel restores work by moving people from consumers to contributors.

Third, this gospel renewal changes people from being self-absorbed to giving sacrificially. Such transformation is vividly portrayed in the opening narratives of the book of Acts. Describing the early Christian community, Luke underscores, "all who believed were together and had all things in common. And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need" (Acts 2:44-45). In greater detail:

Now the full number of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one said that any of the things that belonged to him was his own, but they had everything in common ... There was not a needy person among them, for as many as were owners of lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold and laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need (Acts 4:32-36).

Undoubtedly, the people here depicted by Luke were, before embracing Jesus Christ, egotistical, as are all fallen human beings. But renewed by the gospel, they were transformed into benefactors for the sake of the poor and marginalized in the early church. Thus, the gospel restores work by moving

people from self-absorption to sacrificial giving.

RESTRICTED OR BOUNDLESS WORK?

Several years ago, a student⁴ sought me out to talk about her future. For some time she had had a desire to become a dentist. When talking with others about her aspiration, she had been discouraged from following this path. Some of her advisors had told her that it was inappropriate for her, as a woman, to engage in dentistry, as career work is reserved for men. Others encouraged her as a single woman to get married and have children, for that is the vocation proper to women. Still others urged her to continue her seminary studies so she could be prepared for the ministry, which, as they either implied or made explicit, is the highest vocation and thus better than dentistry.

The quandary in which this student found herself portrays well the tension between heavenly work and earthly work that is felt by many Christians. To state the problem in terms of a question: is God primarily pleased with heavenly/religious/spiritual work, or is he primarily pleased with earthly/secular/material work? Is it more pleasing to God if a Christian is a pastor, a missionary, or a church staff member serving in some ministry, or if that Christian engages in a vocation such as designing and building skyscrapers, practicing medicine and law, teaching statistics in high school, competing as an Olympic athlete, selling shoes, manufacturing hybrid cars, farming corn and soy beans, and the like?

Philosophical factors have deeply influenced the common perspective on this issue, including the church's viewpoint on it. For example, the Platonic and Aristotelian elevation of reason/intellect/spirit/soul and the corresponding minimization or even denigration of embodiment/bodily desire/matter crept into and influenced the church; it in turn exalted the former aspect and diminished or maligned the latter aspect. This perspective can be seen in the church's widespread identification of the image of God with reason or intellect, with the corresponding struggle to include the body in the divine image.

In terms of this viewpoint's influence on human vocation, the church has commonly given priority to a certain type of work: heavenly/church work is regularly valued as being superior to earthly/secular work. Indeed,

engagement in church work—that is, dedicating oneself to and working in the priesthood—became of signal importance. If one really wanted to please God, one would enter the full time ministry and devote oneself to the priesthood or a religious order (the monastic orders of monks and nuns). Saying the Mass, administering the sacraments (especially the Eucharist), praying, fasting, and almsgiving were the religious activities that far outweighed in importance any other kind of (earthly) work. According to Catholic theology, there is an essential difference between laity and clergy; this distinction is bestowed on the latter group through the sacrament of Holy Orders, which confers an indelible spiritual mark on priests.⁵ Evangelical churches, while disagreeing with the Catholic sacrament of Holy Orders and expressing criticism of the Catholic priesthood, have erected a similar (unbiblical) distinction between heavenly/spiritual work—being a pastor or missionary is the highest call—and earthly/secular work—being a dentist is considered to be an inferior profession.

While time and space restrictions preclude more treatment of the reasons for and the results of this common perspective on human vocation, the dichotomy between heavenly and earthly work is both unwarranted and dangerous. As with all matters, the key issue for Christians is the will of the Lord. In question form, to which vocation is God calling? Christians are to seek God's will and obey him by serving in the work to which he calls them. Beginning with Martin Luther, and especially his 1520 *Treatise on Good Works*, evangelical theology has refused to elevate "religious" activity above other types of human work in terms of what is more pleasing to God and what contributes more effectively to personal sanctification. Because the divine call to, and enablement for, the pursuit of holiness (e.g., 2 Pet 1:3-4) intersects with all believers no matter what their vocation may be, those in religious professions—for example, pastors/elders, worship leaders, children's directors, and missionaries—are not in a more favorable state before God nor in a more advantageous position to please him.

CHALLENGES TO WORK

No theology of work, as brief as it may be, is complete without a mention of challenges to work, of which there are at least three. (1) *Work as idol*. The recently coined word "workaholic" underscores that for many in Western

nations and, increasingly, in the developing world, work has become an idol. It has usurped top priority over one's self, one's spouse and family, one's colleagues and friends, and even God, all of whom/which are tragically sacrificed for the sake of vocational advancement and success. Work is a demanding and thankless master, robbing work-addicted people of life, relationships, peace, a good night's sleep, a sense of satisfaction, and more. (2) *Sloth*. Some people who are able-bodied, educated and/or trained, have job opportunities, and are capable of holding down a job, become lazy and fail or refuse to work. They are characterized by affectlessness, being numb to their responsibility to engage in a vocation. As we have seen (2 Thess 3:6-12), Scripture issues a strong warning for such slothful people. The book of Proverbs (6:6-11; 10:26; 13:4; 15:19; 19:24; 20:4; 21:25; 26:13-16) offers wisdom as to why sluggardness is to be avoided. (3) *Lack of work*. Unemployment or underemployment, which may be on a local, national, or even international level, creates a crisis in which people who want to and are able to work cannot find work. The poor and marginalized are especially affected, but the divine mandate to work is less actualized overall in such times of crisis. Still, the dignity of work is championed. For example, the Disney movie *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, released in financially troubled times with high unemployment in a world on the verge of war (1937), featured two songs about work: "Hi Ho, Hi Ho, It's Off to Work We Go," and "Whistle While You Work." Duke Ellington's *Work Song*, part 1 of *Black, Brown, and Beige*—a composition first played at Carnegie Hall in 1943—rehearsed the plight of Negroes and their struggle for work. When work is scarce, human beings as divine image bearers regret and suffer from the lack of opportunities to carry out their responsibility to engage in vocation.

CONCLUSION

This article has treated several important aspects of a theology of work. First, human beings, created in the image of God, are divinely designed to reflect him and represent him as they build civilization through procreation and vocation. Second, human fallenness has wreaked havoc with human work, but human sinfulness and human work can be rescued and restored through the gospel of Jesus Christ. Third, though the church has often elevated heavenly work over earthly work, this error reflects philosophical influences rather

than biblical and theological truth. Fourth, challenges to work wreak havoc with the proper relationship people should have toward work.

In conclusion, two questions are offered for your consideration: (1) How do you regard your work, and how does the biblical and theological framework for work set forth in this article challenge your current viewpoint of your work? (2) If heavenly work is not more valuable than earthly work, does this change your view of the ministry of the church, the church's ministers, and/or the profession in which you are engaged?

¹ Chris Rice, "Big Enough."

² Frederica Mathewes-Green, "The Subject was Noses," *Books & Culture* (January/February, 1997). Her reference is to Dave Barry, *Babies and Other Hazards of Sex: How to Make a Tiny Person in Only 9 Months, with Tools You Probably Have Around the Home* (New York: Rodale Books, 2000).

³ Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality: An Essay in Cosmology* (New York: Free Press, 1978), 105.

⁴ The portrait of this student is a composite of several students with whom I've had similar conversations.

⁵ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1533-1600.