

# MAKING IT WORK



THE CASE FOR  
BIVOCATIONAL MINISTRY

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# 1 | *Work and Meaning*

Work and vocation make up a huge slice of our lives. If Christian believers are uncertain about what the Bible says about work and vocation, it can leave them confused about their role in life, cause them to lack personal fulfillment, and adversely affect their Christian commitment and effectiveness in the workplace. This is even truer for modern bivocational pastors and other ministers. They live and work in a dual role world of work and ministry. If they lack clear understanding of how their roles contribute to their relationship with God and service to others, the heavy load can be intensified.

Some believe that work is a curse—part of the Fall. Work is not a curse and neither did it begin with the Fall. Adam and Eve were given responsibilities and worked before the Fall. They were given dominion, responsibility for naming the animals and tending the Garden. The Fall certainly affected work in some negative ways. Adam would now have to work by the sweat of his brow as the fallen natural world competed with his efforts. The body is easily weakened with fatigue and sore muscles. Many tasks have to be completed over and over again making work drudgerous and monotonous. Adam now worked

in spite of his aching back and weary legs. We could say that work did not begin with the Fall, but that work is more complicated due to the Fall. Much of the joy of work humankind had in the beginning has been stolen. Nevertheless, the Fall could have been much worse. God did not take it all away. Christians can still find joy in work by discovering their calling and offering their work as worship to God.

Lester DeKoster says, “Work is the form in which we make ourselves useful to others. . . . That is why work gives meaning to life. . . . through work that serves others, we also serve God.”<sup>1</sup> DeKoster believes what we do with our time and talents gives life meaning, purpose, and personal dignity. Through work people find significance. This engagement of time, toil, and talent is called vocation, career, occupation, calling, and other terms that may suit a person’s concept of life’s work.

John Bernbaum and Simon Steer state, “Occupation has become a primary criterion for assessing personal worth—we are what we do.”<sup>2</sup> In Western culture occupation has become so central to life it is idolatrous for many. The following observation makes their point: “Consider the sacrifices we lay at the feet of this modern-day idol: the sacrifice of money spent on college tuition fees; of time (measured in years) given to medical school, law school, or other forms of training; of energy expended in study preparation, often at hours when most civilized people are quite unconscious.”<sup>3</sup>

Bernbaum and Steer convincingly point out that Westerners put enormous time and effort into their occupations. The amount of career preparation indicates the great value

put on our daily work. In our competitive culture, money, time, and sacrifice are essential investments for most professional careers. To be successful in today's competitive high-tech world, enormous investment has to be made in preparation and training. Things are changing so rapidly that a person can expect to work in more than one career over a lifetime. At each stage, more training will be required.

Although careers can become idols in our lives, having a corrupted view of work can be just as detrimental. A coworker once told me, "I detest work!" How sad that some people feel trapped in a career treadmill. For some Christians, life is filled with drudgery and boredom due to a poor understanding of work's positive value or because they never discovered their calling. Getting stuck in an undesirable job, especially one that you are not gifted for, can be debilitating to one's self-fulfillment. Young people should be encouraged to be proactive toward finding God's calling for their lives. There are many evaluation tools available that can help a young person discover his or her temperament, talents, and interests. Discovering these personal propensities and foibles early in life can set a better life trajectory.

### **BIBLICAL VIEW OF WORK**

A. C. McGiffert agrees with Bernbaum and Steer and places even more emphasis on the biblical significance of work with these words: "The Bible sees work as woven into the very structure of life. Far from being an extra or a by-product, it exists at the core of the God-world relationship."<sup>4</sup> These Christian authors place great biblical importance on work as a primary source of meaning and

significance. Finding meaning in work can help us find purpose in life. Work gives people significance as participants in their sphere of reality and can bring them a great sense of belonging—belonging to God and His world!

The significance of work is found early in the drama of humanity. “And God blessed them, and God said unto them, Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it: and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth.”<sup>5</sup> Genesis 2:15 says, “And the Lord God took the man, and put him into the garden of Eden to dress it and to keep it.” The responsibility to dress, keep, subdue, and have dominion was given to Adam and Eve before the Fall. This indicates that from the beginning God made man and woman for work. This job description comes from a God who is Himself a worker. As creatures created in God’s image, we are workers as well.

The Fall brought a curse, not only on spiritual reality and the physical world, but to the nature of work as well. Work was a major factor in life before and after the Fall, but it changed. In a fallen world, work includes toil, natural impediments, exhaustion, and human limitation. This makes work bittersweet. Bernbaum and Steer put it in these words: “As a result of the fall, work is no longer the pure joy that God intended it to be. The blessing became a burden and the joy became toil. This profound change is described in Genesis 3:16–19, a passage which emphasizes that the labor of childbirth will be fraught with pain as will other types of physical labor.”<sup>6</sup>

The Fall brought sweeping changes to the world in many negative ways. Life was not replaced with something totally different, but things continued in an altered state. Work was one of those aspects of life that continued, but it became tainted with the bitterness of toil and boredom.

*Common grace* is a term used by theologians to describe the limited nature of the Fall. According to this concept, the Fall was not as bad as it could have been.<sup>7</sup> God could have stripped away humankind's superior intelligence, creativity, energy to work, ability to think abstractly, and the ability to plan our destinies. Human beings were created in God's image and did not lose that unique distinction at the Fall. This means that all humanity is given God-like attributes. Humans have amazing creativity that enables them to organize, build, and create complex things. The ability to plan for and envision the future is unique to the human race. Animals operate from instincts alone and are not conscious as to why they do certain things. Humans can even engage in meta-cognition (thinking about thinking). Very few animals are self-aware, and the few that are have an extremely limited perception of themselves. Being influenced by a conscience is a remarkable, God-given, moral guidance system that no other animal has. Language is also unique to the human species. Even if some animals had the intelligence to use language, they do not have the physical apparatus to speak. We are endowed with many other special talents and giftings that were retained after the Fall. Even atheists possess a God-given, divine image and can contribute to the well-being of humanity. Artists paint beautiful landscapes, and musicians compose

and perform amazing music. Engineers design spectacular bridges and aircraft carriers, and scientists and doctors discover life-saving medical procedures. Our world is fallen and flawed, but it is also filled with amazingly talented people. Common grace has brought our world the computer, internet, space travel, organ transplants, flying machines, and antibiotics. All of this innovation and scientific discovery is a gift from God.

Even though work is rigorous and tiring, it continues to fill an essential human need. Work is a primary medium for self-fulfillment, personal development, connection with others, and a provision for the sustenance of life. For the Christian worker, it is all that and more! As a believer, we are called by God to a field of work. We acknowledge that our giftings are from God, and the act of fulfilling our callings glorifies God. The workplace is also our venue for witnessing to a lost world and an expression of worship. Work, for believers, helps to fulfill God's redemptive mission in the world and brings the believer into harmony with life's divine purpose.

Edward Harris agrees with the centrality of work: "Work is not something peripheral to human life but is part of God's designed purpose for man. Labor is not some appendage to man's existence nor is it some man-appointed duty. It is of the very substance of human life as God intends it to be."<sup>8</sup> Harris emphasizes the church's role in giving work meaning: "We recognize and understand that to live is to labor, so that one searching and realistic description of man is *Homo faber*, Man the worker. It is, then, abundantly clear that unless our religion can address itself to our work with powerful and



illuminating insights, our religion will be out of touch with a large and important part of our life and will be hard put to escape the damaging charge of irrelevancy.”<sup>9</sup> If the church is silent on such an important issue, the church may become irrelevant to many workers.

DeKoster addresses two primary aspects of biblical work that give it meaning: “(1) God Himself chooses to be served through work that serves others, and therefore molds working into culture to provide workers with ever better means of service; and (2) God has so made us that through working we actually sculpt the kind of selves we each are becoming, in time and for eternity.”<sup>10</sup>

### **THE CURSE OF LAZINESS**

Paul’s blunt warning has been referenced many times to emphasize the role of work in the Christian life: “If any would not work, neither should he eat.”<sup>11</sup> Some scholars believe Paul was addressing a malaise in the church rising from the anticipation of an imminent Second Coming. They may have assumed work and the accumulation of worldly things was a superfluous endeavor. The writer of Ecclesiastes offers a warning about the consequence of indolence in the same vein: “Through laziness, the rafters sag; because of idle hands, the house leaks.”<sup>12</sup> These verses emphasize the physical discomfort brought about by laziness. Generally speaking, working hard can bring physical benefits. A good worker can gain respect from the employer and find satisfaction from that approval. In addition, monetary gains can result as well. Although making a direct link between a diligent work ethic and

financial success can be complex, many times success can be a corollary to hard work.

The Roman Catholic Church of the Middle Ages made popular a concept called the “Seven Deadly Sins” (i.e., pride, greed, lust, envy, gluttony, anger, and sloth). While they may not all be sinful, these attitudes, dispositions, and frames of mind can cause a person to commit sinful acts. “Sloth” is better known as laziness in today’s vernacular. As Anthony Campolo points out, in addition to the negative effects it can have on a career, laziness also can destroy a marriage, impair good parenting, dull the enjoyment of life, and thwart becoming a better person. When a person is too lazy to put forth the effort, it can be sinful! Campolo notes, “Laziness saps the vitality out of human existence. All of us who have wasted time know of that debilitation. . . . Sloth does not create a sense of well-being, but leaves us dissipated and groggy.”<sup>13</sup> The author of Proverbs made the following observation: “I went past the field of a sluggard, past the vineyard of someone who has no sense; thorns had come up everywhere, the ground was covered with weeds, and the stone wall was in ruins. I applied my heart to what I observed and learned a lesson from what I saw: A little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to rest—and poverty will come on you like a thief and scarcity like an armed man.”<sup>14</sup>

The Bible has much to say about laziness. When people lack industry and fail to be productive, it cuts at the roots of our divine purpose. As creatures created in God’s image, we fail to reflect the nature of God as the worker. Adam and Eve were given responsibility to care for God’s creation at the beginning—before and after the Fall.

God's creation can be made better by human effort. The gold has to be mined, diamonds cut, gardens planted and cultivated, animals tamed, and songs written. God gives humanity a world that is untamed and undeveloped, and He expects humans to partner with Him as subcreators. People can bring order and greater productivity to our world. Natural laws and the many resources in our world can be utilized to our advantage by work.

### **THE PSEUDODICHOTOMY: SPIRITUALITY AND WORK**

Sherman and Hendricks describe a false separation between the spiritual and the physical as a “two-story view of work” as: “A system that sets up a dichotomy or hierarchy among things. Things are separated into two categories, one of which is inherently superior.”<sup>15</sup> Some believe physical work is something we do out of necessity and not for some higher cause. Blash Cosden puts it this way: “For so many of us in the west, and throughout the world, work is something we do, and often endure, simply to keep life and limb together. Most of us put up with the difficult realities of our daily work because we have to.”<sup>16</sup>

For some, work is only the means to make money to pay bills. For them, work is at the bottom of the eternal-temporal hierarchy and a distraction from the more spiritual things of life. This thinking leads people to believe that to be truly productive, one must engage in spiritual things and avoid wasting time doing chores and tending to occupational duties. This view assumes that the body and the physical world are not sacred. Some ministers and missionaries encourage people to forsake the

temporal world completely and give their lives to “real” ministry. Although full-time ministry is a worthy calling, not all God’s children are called to be full-time ministers (e.g., evangelists, pastors, missionaries, and other church ministries). Yet everyone is called by God to pursue his or her talents and abilities wherever they may lead. The church needs plumbers, electricians, doctors, engineers, salesmen, businessmen, and many other occupations. The church cannot survive unless many Christians thrive in the workplace. The financial rewards and the inroads into the community by Christian workers can be enormous. Christian workers should be encouraged to find happiness and fulfillment in their careers because they are glorifying God when they work for Him in their specific calling.

David Westcott states, “The separation of work from worship is totally unjustified.”<sup>17</sup> God has made us for His pleasure.<sup>18</sup> He wants a relationship with humankind—not in just the churchgoing aspect, but in life’s totality. God’s promise to the Hebrews is assuring: “I will set My tabernacle among you, and My soul shall not abhor you. I will walk among you and be your God, and you shall be My people. I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, that you should not be their slaves; I have broken the bands of your yoke and made you walk upright.”<sup>19</sup>

The Tabernacle in the wilderness was served not only by priests, but also by workers and crafters (e.g., woodworkers, tree cutters, metallurgists, tailors, apothecaries, olive-press workers, cloth dyers, tanners, jewelers, stonecutters, farmers, cattlemen, butchers, and bakers). The structure and artistic trappings were crafted by gifted workers, and not only that, Exodus 31 says these workers

were filled “with the spirit of God, in wisdom, and in understanding, and in knowledge, and in all manner of workmanship” to do their work. The spiritual ceremonies around the Tabernacle conducted by the priests were made possible with the physical labor of many workers. Work cannot be minimized as something peripheral and not integral to the spiritual ceremonies in that ancient tradition.

God abides in us and we abide in God. Paul used this analogy: “What? know ye not that your body is the temple of the Holy Ghost which is in you, which ye have of God, and ye are not your own? For ye are bought with a price: therefore glorify God in your body, and in your spirit, which are God’s.”<sup>20</sup> Glorifying God in our bodies suggests that our work is critical toward giving God something of ourselves. R. Paul Stevens says, “The practice of the presence of God is not the exclusive vocation of professional ministers and cloistered monks. Nor is it a sacred interlude but woven into the warp and woof of everyday life. It is part of our calling.”<sup>21</sup> To truly be spiritual, we must do so in the trenches of life while working and toiling in the grit and grime of a fallen world. Lights shine the brightest in the darkest of surroundings.

The New Testament makes it clear there are diverse ministries in the church. Each person is a distinct member of the body of Christ having particular areas of ministry.<sup>22</sup> Paul said, “Brethren, let every man, wherein he is called, therein abide with God.”<sup>23</sup> Paul exhorted further that everyone has a place of calling: “But now hath God set the members every one of them in the body, as it hath pleased him.”<sup>24</sup> By using our talents and abilities, we are

giving to God and pleasing Him. Striving for perfection in our work is one way we can practice good stewardship. “A worker who produces poor work is not a good steward, and in turn, he is not a good worshiper. He is failing to give glory to the ultimate Creator. All labor, including physical labor, is honorable.”<sup>25</sup> Striving for excellence in our work—even menial work—is worthy of God’s recognition when it is offered as worship. If we are too eager to draw lines of separation between spirituality and work, it may dampen the joy of those Christian laypeople who work long hours in factories and businesses each day. The church should provide spiritual reasons for work so that Christian workers will experience joy in the workplace.

### **VOCATION, WORK, AND MINISTRY**

The work a person engages in might seem to be a personal choice, but a higher force may be at work. Stevens points out the term “vocation” has an interesting meaning.

The Christian doctrine of vocation—so central to the theology of the whole people of God—starts with being called to *Someone* before we are called to something. And it is not something we choose, like a career. We are chosen. The Latin roots of the word “vocation,” *vocatio* and *voco*, mean simply to be called or to have a calling. We might do well to eliminate the word “vocation” for a while and substitute “calling,” which invites the question, “*Who* called?”<sup>26</sup>

The term *call* has embedded in it the need for a caller.<sup>27</sup> This makes a response to a calling a fulfillment of God’s desires for one’s life. There is a divine propensity

toward work which dignifies all work that is a response to a divine calling. Stevens presents a biblical doctrine of vocation by suggesting that the whole of a person's life includes three vocations: personal, Christian, and human. However, not having a theology of vocation might result in the following:

Without any theology of vocation we lapse into debilitating alternatives: fatalism (doing what is required by the “forces” and the “powers”); luck (which denies purposefulness in life and reduces our life to a bundle of accidents); karma (which ties performance to future rewards); nihilism (which denies that there is any good end to which the travail of history might lead); and, the most common alternative today, self-actualization (in which we invent the meaning and purpose of our lives, making us magicians). In contrast the biblical doctrine of vocation proposes that the whole of our lives finds meaning in relation to the sweet summons of a good God.<sup>28</sup>

When an individual embraces a vocation, he or she honors the sovereignty of God by answering a divine call. But having a poor understanding of vocation and not recognizing God's role in one's work can lead to an unhappy career and theological pitfalls.