

God's plan for work

Work in creation

What is your 'calling'?

Work, value and
the gospel



Includes
discussion
guide



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From the editor

AS WE THINK ABOUT GOD'S PLAN FOR WORK, ONE significant question is the relationship between 'secular work' and 'gospel work'. Is there any distinction between the two? If all Christians have the task of living out and promoting the gospel in all of their lives, making disciples as they themselves are disciples, what meaningful difference is there between a clergyman engaged in 'full-time ministry' and a faithful Christian accountant? Is all work the same? Does it always glorify God?

A complication in our thinking is that we have inherited from our culture a tight connection between what we *do* and the value we give to who we *are*. That is, when for some reason we decide that a certain activity is more useful than another, or to be prioritized, then we habitually tend to think that the person who performs that activity is more valuable than another. This is a terrible way to proceed, as we end up devaluing not only activities we don't commonly think of as 'work' (at least in the employment sense—such as child-rearing) but also those who do them.

No doubt you will have your own set of questions and assumptions about the topic of work. I hope you're ready to be stretched and perhaps challenged, as Paul Grimmond's contention in this MiniZine is that much of the recent debate has centred on misrepresentations of key principles that we need to straighten out and understand well. In order to do this, Paul leads us through examining the cultural mandate (humanity's task of filling, subduing and ruling over the earth), the idea of vocation (or calling), and how the Bible views work in light of the gospel. I'm sure this collection will be a stimulating read, provoking thought and discussion on this important issue, and useful in coming to a biblical position. **SAM FRENEY**

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God's plan for work

The cultural mandate

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It's lunchtime. A young mother sits on the bench, painting her eight-month-old's face with food—that mouth is hard to find. With her spare third eye she watches her toddler negotiate the finer points of park etiquette with the oversized gorilla who isn't interested in sharing the springy rocker thing—he's four! For just a moment she gives herself permission to dream about being the council worker digging a trench on the other side of the park. What a life!

Oblivious to his starring role in another's dreams, the labourer leans on his shovel and watches the suit run through the gardens. The suit isn't in his suit because it's lunchtime and he's part of the get-sweaty brigade. The trench digger mumbles something to himself about 'an honest day's labour' as he attacks the trench with renewed vigour.

The suit spies his old work colleague managing her two charges and jogs over. "How's the holiday?" he asks, never having spent more than two minutes with a toddler in his life. They exchange pleasantries

and both of them notice the priest talking earnestly to the old couple on the other bench. (They can tell he's a priest because he's dressed in black and has a funny collar.) They both agree that he should get a real job. The suit jogs off as the toddler breaks into a howl. The negotiations haven't gone well.

This scenario is, of course, entirely fictitious. But it helpfully raises some of the difficulties that we face when it comes to thinking about work. First: work is so closely tied to our sense of self-worth that it's a difficult subject for us to be objective about. What God thinks that work is, and what he





thinks about the work that I do, cannot be separated in our hearts from the significance and value of our lives. As a result, many of us have ideas about work that we cherish as Christian, whether we have examined them biblically or not.

Second, and in an entirely different direction, when we speak about work, what exactly are we speaking about? Is the suit working when he runs? Would it be different if he were a triathlete? Can the young mum really call it work when she does it for nothing? Is mental labour different

to physical labour? What makes work work?

And finally, into the midst of all of this, if our purpose is to speak biblically and Christianly

about work, we enter yet another minefield. Is there a distinction between 'gospel work' and 'secular work'? Is all work the same, and does it always glorify God?

This last question in particular has become a hotly-debated topic in evangelical circles in recent years. My contention in this MiniZine is that much of the debate centres on a misunderstanding of three key biblical ideas that have been misrepresented and misunderstood. Hopefully, as we look at each of these ideas, you will rapidly see why they are important. Whether my explanation of

what the Bible actually says about them is accurate, I will leave you to judge. But I am hoping that these articles will stimulate us to keep thinking about the nature of the work that God has given us in Christ, as his people.

The ideas we are going to examine are: (1) the cultural mandate; (2) the doctrine of vocation; and (3) our understanding of value and work in light of the gospel.

THE CULTURAL MANDATE

Our first key biblical idea is the cultural mandate. And to investigate it, you have to know what it is! I'm not usually an advocate of Wikipedia when it comes to theological issues, but on this occasion it's pretty much spot on:

The cultural mandate or creation mandate is the divine injunction found in Genesis 1:28, in which God (YHWH), after having created the world and all in it, ascribes to humankind the tasks of filling, subduing, and ruling over the earth. It has served as a basis among both Christian and Jewish peoples for all manner of cultural activities: economic engagement, scientific inquiry, literary exploration, military expansion, and alternately, exploitative as well as conservationist responses to the natural environment.¹

The key thing to note is where the issue lies. Most Christians (and most Jews!) agree that

¹ 'Cultural mandate', *Wikipedia*, viewed 27 November 2012: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cultural_mandate

Is there a distinction between 'gospel work' and 'secular work'? Is all work the same, and does it always glorify God?

God said we were to “be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it”. The real question is: what did he mean? And that’s what the rest of this article is about. What exactly do God’s words in Genesis mean for us today?

A BRIEF HISTORY OF AN IDEA

From the church fathers onwards, the words of Genesis 1:28 have played a significant role in how we talk about the purpose of humanity, but these words have formed the basis for almost entirely opposed views.² The main issues surround a few key questions. But perhaps the most important one is this: does the cultural mandate describe (a) our current state; (b) a previous state that has been lost to humanity; or (c) a future state that we will one day occupy?³

This is an important question because how you answer it shapes how you speak about human work. One strand of thought (coming from the church fathers and Aquinas) is that the cultural mandate describes humanity’s present status. We are, right now, rulers of the

2 As RE Manahan explains in his doctoral thesis, ‘A Re-examination of the Cultural Mandate: An analysis and evaluation of the dominion materials’, ThD thesis, Grace Theological Seminary, Winona Lake, 1982, viewed 27 November 2012: http://faculty.gordon.edu/hu/bi/ted_hildebrandt/OTeSources/01-Genesis/Text/Books/Manahan-Cultural/Manahan-Cultural.htm. Much of what follows in this section comes from Manahan’s work.

3 Although they are sometimes spoken about separately, (b) and (c) are closely related to each other.



world. And we are rulers (according to most) by virtue of our reason. Our ability to think about the world makes us like God and allows us to understand and manipulate the creation. Our rule is seen in things like our power over the animal kingdom and our ability to create and reshape our environment.

But for Augustine, and even more so for Luther, the status and task of ruling was something that was given to Adam and Eve but almost entirely obliterated by the fall. While they would agree that we have a limited power over the birds and animals, they would contend that most of our lives in fact display our inability to rule. For both of these men, humanity does not rule now; rather, we wait to rule in the new heavens and new earth as a result of belonging to Christ. In the here and now, our work is to participate in Christ’s rule by living godly and holy lives.

Which brings us to the key question. Do we, as we work in the world, act to establish or progress God’s rule over creation by bringing more and more of the world under our control through our technological prowess? Or are we people who can only wait to inherit our rightful position as rulers? And as such, are our current actions merely bandaids for a dying world?

WHAT DOES THE BIBLE SAY?

At least part of the reason that the cultural mandate has given rise to such differing opinions is the relative scarcity of biblical material. For a verse that has played such a significant theological role in our understanding of ourselves, it is hardly mentioned in the rest of the Bible. Despite a few allusions in the Old Testament, the only clear reference to the idea of humanity’s dominion and its connection to God’s words in the beginning occurs in Psalm 8. What does the psalmist say?

When I look at your heavens, the work
of your fingers,
the moon and the stars, which you
have set in place,
what is man that you are mindful of him,
and the son of man that you care
for him?