

everyone wants to rule the world

developing a theology of work

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points for developing
a theology of work

1. Aim of the Paper

In the past, I haven't thought much about the positives of work. Nor have I been comfortable with the reasons others have given for being positive about work. Hence, work has been a relatively unexamined doctrine for me. Personally, I'm just trying to answer two questions:

1. What can we say that is positive about work?
2. What are the theological connections between work and ministry of Christ? Do we have any at the moment?

2. Working Assumptions

This is just to let you know the assumptions working in my head as I write this paper. You will notice their fingerprints throughout the paper and they significantly affect the outcome of what anyone thinks about the place and significance of work.

(a) Creation and redemption relationship

Creation and redemption cannot be pitted against one another, nor is one independent of the other. That is, we cannot consider the issue of work from a creational/Edenic perspective alone, nor approach work from a redemptive perspective alone. This I consider to be a common mistake and it led me to jot down the following statements when considering the creation/redemption relationship:

- redemption is the goal of creation
- creation falls through the sin of man – creation redeemed through the redemption of man
- creation is so affected by sin that a new creation is required
- creation suffers the affects of the Fall (curses)
- creation is the context of redemption and part of redemption
- rest is the goal of creation, redemption re-establishes and realises that goal
- resurrection is both God's approval of creation (it is redeemed) and its

condemnation (of sin and its affects within creation)

- incarnation is ultimately to redeem humanity, creation and the heavens from sin

At all points creation is affected by redemption. Through the fall of humanity, creation suffered the effects of sin; through the redemption of humanity, creation will be liberated from bondage (Rom 8:18-22); through the continuing sin of humanity, creation suffers (Hos 4:3). Right now creation groans wishing the moment would arrive when her bondage will be over and she too will enter into the freedom of the children of God. Also, creation is not redeemed independent of man. Creation's eye is on man, waiting for God to close the final act.

The point: all creation looks forward to redemption, in particular the redemption of man to whom her future is bound. Any theology of creation will have a forward orientation. A theology of work will and must have a similar future orientation. The challenge is to hold creation and redemption together in a theology of work.

(b) The resurrection, continuity and discontinuity into the new creation

All parties agree there is both continuity and discontinuity between the old and new creation. Where we position ourselves on this continuum affects a theology of work.

The key is the resurrection of Christ, his physical body now in heaven; the redemption of our physical bodies and how they provide a paradigm for understanding the redemption of creation.

Personally, I find much of the positiveness about the continuity of creation overstated. Yes, there will be continuity. Yes, our physical bodies will be redeemed. Yes, this creation will be transformed and it too will come into the glory of the new creation that we will enjoy in our new bodies. However, my problem is the confidence of precisely what that continuity is. Paul considers our bodies to be a seed, the plant of which we cannot

tell what our new bodies will be like. It must be the same for creation. Therefore, to speak confidently about the continuity question is to have a confidence that Paul does not share.

Therefore, to give work significance due to its redemptive/continuing affects in the new creation, I find to be more confident than Scripture. To say what we do now will have an eternal effect for creation, is to be as confident that packing on Avon and having liposuction will do the same thing for our bodies in the next age.

However, this discontinuity we can be sure of: our new bodies and the new creation will be without sin, imperishable, and eternal. I think this is the emphasis of passages like 2 Peter 3.

(c) A significant silence?

The New Testament doesn't have a lot to say about work. There is a significant silence. Some thoughts about the silence ...

First, is what the New Testament says all that we need to know about work? That is, is the New Testament comprehensive in giving us a theology of work? Therefore, work is for money, for feeding ourselves and families, for being generous to the ministry and the household of God. There is little else to be said about work. The silence is interpreted as being that there is nothing more to say. I disagree.

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Secondly, the New Testament letters are written to pastoral situations. Where work is an issue, it is mentioned. Where it isn't, there is no mention. This, I think, leaves us free to interpret the silence as non-exhaustive in any doctrine. However, any theology must fit with the data that we have.

Thirdly, the silence can be significant because the New Testament authors had opportunity to use a theology of work as they wrote to the churches. For example, when commending slaves to work hard, why not say work hard because you are redeeming creation? Likewise with the sluggards of Thessalonica. Why not instruct us more toward a creational theology, rather than a hope based

eschatological theology? To build a theology of work, giving to it an importance and weight not there in the New Testament is another mistake. Hence the silence can be very significant.

3. What is Work?

(a) A definition

From Genesis 1:26-28, Genesis 2:15 and Genesis 3:16-19, here is a 3-part definition of work, with some brief comments on each part.

The activity of ruling creation

Man is put into the garden to care for and cultivate it. In other words, to work in the garden. This idea is expanded in Genesis 1:26 and 28. We are made in God's image and, because we are made in God's image, we are rulers of creation. Genesis 1:28 expands this idea to include being fruitful and filling the earth as well as ruling it. Work is the activity of ruling creation. The work-rule-blessing link is again made in Genesis 3. Man's blessing itself is cursed. The curse is upon both his work/rule and filling the earth.

Work is also particularly related to the provision of food. In Genesis 1:29, God gives all the seed-bearing plants to man for food. He is cursed (Gen 3:17) because he ate and now the ground is cursed so 'eating of it' will be painful toil. When placed in the garden, the trees are described as being good for food. Creation was given for humanity to fill and rule, but also as food – presumably a consequence of his rule/work.

Notice work is a good part of God's creation, which makes sense if work is indeed rule.

The activity of ruling creation in relationship with God

Work is done in relationship with God. Man is placed in the garden, but the very next verse describes how man is to obey God as well. Work/rule cannot be properly achieved outside of relationship with God. The curse reinforces this point. Babel is a clear example of work outside of relationship with God.

The activity of ruling creation in relationship with God frustrated by sin and its effects

Due to sin (disobedience), the blessing is affected. The curse on the woman (i.e. now being fruitful and filling the earth will come with great pain) and the man (i.e. now ruling, subduing and eating will also

come with great pain) are direct words against the blessing they received from the Lord in Genesis 1. Work will be frustrated. Creation will no longer give of its fruitfulness to humanity – mankind will need to sweat for it and even then the earth will produce thorns and thistles. The news doesn't get better: it will be this way all your life and then you die. In short, our rule over creation (work) is now frustrated due to sin and its effects (particularly difficult ending in death).

(b) Work in its theological context

Notice the theological context surrounding work in Genesis 1-3. This theological context keeps reappearing as work is discussed in the remainder of the Bible. This should be expected given the theological connections established in the creation account. Note, work cannot be considered as a topic on its own. It is presented within a theological context and it's within this theological context (given in Genesis) that we need to consider the doctrine.

The significant and related topics in Genesis 1-3 are creation, rest, image of God, blessing, sin/disobedience, curse, and death.

4. A Brief Biblical Overview

(a) Old Testament

To keep the Old Testament overview brief, I'll just concentrate on Israel in the promised land where work, and its related topics, converge within the history of Israel.

The promised land is described repeatedly as a land of rest (Josh 1:13, 11:23, 21:44, 22:4, 23:1). Rest does not simply mean living in peace with the surrounding nations, though this is included. More significantly, rest appears to be the place where the promises of God are fulfilled. So Israel at rest are God's unnumbered people living in the land being a blessing to the nations.

Work in the promised land is the reestablishment of humanity's rule over creation. The land will be a place flowing with milk and honey. Wonderful images of abundance – each man under his own fig tree, living in houses he didn't build and eating the fruit of the land he did not plant. Wombs would be fertile (blessing again) and the land would produce an abundance for the people of God – its the curse in reverse. In short, they would rule

creation by their work in relationship with God.

But, if they disobeyed the Lord, the curse would stand – famine, hardship, drought, death (Note: relationship with God). The blessing (work/rule) would be lost again to the curse. The land of rest would again become a land of unfulfilled promises.

In the promised land all Israel – her servants, her livestock, her land – were to observe the Sabbath-rest. This pointed both backwards to the Lord's saving work, and forward to the day when the Lord's promises would be fulfilled, in the promised land and ultimately in heaven (Ps 95, Heb 2-4, particularly Heb 4:10).

Within the rest of the promised land comes the writings of Proverbs and Ecclesiastes. These are significant because they more directly address the issue of work. Proverbs speaks of how to live wisely, righteously in fear of the Lord (Note: relationship with God). Surprisingly little is said about work except that if you work hard, you will share in the abundance of the land. Be a sluggard and the land will not yield to you, you will not eat. Wisdom is working hard and the land will produce her abundance for you. All understood within the fear of Yahweh. Ecclesiastes provides another perspective on work, from the same author at the same time. Work is the pressure point where sin and its effects are felt keenly. Work is hard and difficult. Ultimately death stands mocking the work of our hands for who knows what fool will follow you and what he will do with all your work, presumably it will be wasted. The best we can do is find present satisfaction in our work, the gift of God.

Even in the promised land, rule over creation is frustrated due to sin and its effects. Though the promised land is the place where blessing is promised and the curse reversed, sin still rears its head in relation to work.

(b) New Testament

To me the New Testament picture appears more complex. But it is here the related theological context and work/rule combine to resolve the tension of the curse in relation to work/rule.

The Gospels

The synoptics draw together Christ's salvation work from sin and its effects, work and rest. So Jesus is repeatedly rebuked, and eventually killed for, his

work done on the Sabbath (Mk 2, Mat 12, Lk 6). He does good on the Sabbath, his disciples pick grain on the Sabbath. Jesus is condemned for particular works, not just any work, that reveal him to be the God-man, Servant, Prophet etc. His works reveal that sin and its effects are no barrier to him, indeed he can forgive sin. There are no explicit connections made between all these topics. However, the following connections are made explicit in John's Gospel.

John speaks of the Father's redemptive work being done through the Son. The Father has been at work since the creation of the world. Jesus does the work of the Father, who is always at work, but Jesus' work is his miracle-faith-producing work. The miracles of Jesus, which the Father does through the Son, should have produced faith testifying that he is the Christ (5:17, 6:26-29, 9:3-4, 14:10-11, 20:30-31). However, this apparently 'new spin' on work is not independent of the great themes surrounding human work/rule already seen in the Old Testament: creation, work, the Sabbath-rest, sin, and death. John is not redefining work, as I have read in the past, but fulfilling what it is to rule as a human within creation, again with a redemptive edge, so that all may share this rule. He is making explicit what is implicit in the synoptics.

Hebrews

Work/rule is closely related to the sin bearing work of Christ and his mediatory work now (because he has defeated sin and understands our plight). Christ now rules because he has dealt with sin and death. We enter God's rest through faith in the one who has dealt with our sin. We rest from our work when we enter God's rest through faith in Christ. The point: work/rule cannot be separated from the sin bearing work of Christ.

Christ is the God-man who rules now and we are waiting until everything is placed under his feet. Only in Christ is sin dealt with and can man rule as we were created to rule. Everything is placed under his feet through the gospel as people submit their lives to him. Only when sin and its effects are dealt with, can there be real rule.

1 Cor 15:58

Note work, but now the work of the Lord, again appears after the climactic passage of the defeat of sin and death through the resurrection of Christ.

Other

1 and 2 Thessalonians, 2 Corinthians 8-9, 1 Corinthians 9, slaves/masters (Eph, Col, Titus, 1 Pet).

5. Theological Connections Between Work and the Work of Christ

How is work related to Christ? Especially since Christ, through his work, has defeated sin and death. Are there any connections or has work/rule been fulfilled in Christ in such a way as to deny work any real significance in the present? Stated again: if rule is now established in the gospel-work, do other forms of labour have any significance? To answer this, I think we need to re-establish the links between work and the gospel work.

The one paragraph summary: I'm arguing for a Christological understanding of work. This Christological focus brings an eschatological perspective because that is where the work/rule of Christ is fulfilled. That is, eschatology is the by-product of the work of Christ. This is over and against a purely Edenic focus or a purely redemptive schema. It also protects, in my mind, redemption remaining the work of Christ, rather than a partial activity in our work or even in our gospel preaching.

The point at which our rule and the rule of Christ converge is the eschaton. Some solutions ...

One solution is to overstate the convergence. Work then becomes the endeavour which is significant in and of itself and contributes to a holistic redemption of all creation. Also our work will bear its fruit in the new creation. As compelling as this solution may be, I find the New Testament silence at this point deafening. Paul had ample opportunity to raise such reasons for work and speaking about redemption and the positive affects our rule/work in the world could and would have on creation but he doesn't. Instead, he tirelessly speaks of Christ.

A second solution is to undervalue work/rule in the present. That is, the New Testament speaks of work in terms of providing for yourself, your family and a means to generosity. This basic interpretation also draws significance on the silence in the New Testament, assuming that this must be the sum total that we can now say, given we are in the last days. This interpretative schema can

give work a meagre place within the Christian life. Understandably, work can become a second-rate alternative to Christian ministry. It can become difficult to think of anything positive about work when compared to ministry. This schema assumes the New Testament speaks about work in totality (an assumption which would be hard to justify), given the place of work in the creation account. There is little theological connection between work and the work of Christ, labour and gospel preaching.

A third alternative, and my preferred solution, is to see eschatology as the

must also point people to the real rule that overcomes sin and its effects. To see work as the end in itself, denies the significance of the work of Christ and misunderstands the shortfall of our present rule.

However we live in the redemptive age, when time is short, and the Lord could return at any moment. Redemption affects all aspects of creation. Even in our work we relate to our masters, husbands, rulers with redemptive purposes. Sin and death remind us of the shortcomings of our rule and point us to Christ and his

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theological connection between work and ministry. We will one day rule with Christ in the new creation. That is our destiny. Rule will be re-established for us in the rule of Christ. Our work today is not a waste of time but indeed an anticipation of who we will be with Christ then. To work is to rule, to rule is to be like Christ, in whose image we are being transformed. Though frustrated by sin now, we will rule gloriously with justice, peace, kindness, love, To work is to be human and Christians know what their rule will be like then. We are doing today what we will be doing then.

Therefore, work is not insignificant. Rule is fundamental to what it is to be human and made in the image of God. Our rule will be distinctive, like Christ (ruling through service), through the Spirit. Just as the fruit of the Spirit are important for every Christian, because we are being transformed into the image of Christ, so too is work, which is part of being in that image. It is not an optional activity, but a Christian activity. However, the world is not ready for this rule. Like Christ, ridicule, slander, and weakness will be part of the Christian experience in the work-place.

The work-place is where those in relationship with God exercise their rule now by exposing sin and ruling selflessly. Work is a most appropriate place to express rule in relationship with God (which only the Christian can do). We will reign very differently. It is important here not to overplay the place of work. Work/rule is our endeavour now, but sin is only overcome in Christ. Hence our work now

rule – a rule we will one day enjoy. The present time demands a redemptive priority. Redemption reprioritises creational gifts. Work does not bring redemption – only the work of Christ does.

Indeed, only through the gospel and in the resurrection of Christ is rule established. Yet work is a fundamental task for which we've been created and is an anticipation of what we will be doing with Christ. It is not divorced from the work of Christ but an anticipation and pattern (though sin affected) of his.

6. Outcomes of This Theology of Work

- Work is an anticipation of who we will be with Christ – ruling the new creation with him. This time with justice, selflessness, honouring God, and for eternity.
- Work is a God-like and truly human activity. We are made in the image of God to rule.
- Work will remind us of sin and its effects (creational frustrations, injustice, lying, favouritism, etc).
- We are created to be rulers, not unemployed. This explains why both believers and unbelievers go crazy when unemployed for a significant time. Even students look forward to returning to uni after the long summer break!
- Work itself is not redemptive nor does it have redemptive effects in the

world. Instead it looks forward to the redemption that comes through the rule of the one who dealt finally and fully with sin. To make a mistake here is to locate redemption in our rule, not Christ's rule. It also minimises the effects of sin upon our work and world, for which the work of Christ is the only antidote.

- Work does not have intrinsic value (whatever this means). Perhaps it is better to say work is an intrinsically human activity. Its value is determined by how it points to Christ and his rule and is a living out of our rule in relationship to God.
- Work is good and reminds us of the rule of Christ. Gospel proclamation (ministry) makes possible what our work/rule can only point toward/begin to participate in.
- The time gives priority to re-establishing rule in relationship to God. We work, thinking rule, but thinking of Christ's rule and working in such a way as to commend and please him.
- The human heart wants to give more significance to our effort. This tendency leads us to see work being about us and our activity, rather than about God and his purposes, namely Christ and the redemption of the world.
- Giving work redemptive ability, draws our eyes downward from the ruling Christ to our own fractured rule. This sidelines Christ and his work, minimises the effects of sin, uplifts our capability – all very naughty things!
- Giving work a stand-alone status (i.e. apart from redemption) is another form of denying the rule of Christ. This, I think, tends to be the majority Christian position simply because we haven't thought it through.
- Work is the activity by which creation gives up its fruitfulness to humanity. So work does produce food, wealth, and a means by which we can be generous.
- As we rule like Christ, we will naturally change societal structures. That's because we rule like Christ not because our work is redemptive of society nor preparing society for the new creation.

- The second-best question? Work is second-best, inasmuch as love is second-best. They are second-best to what we will experience in the new creation.
- The work/ministry divide doesn't exist. Work and Christ must go together.
- We must enjoy and find fulfilment in our work. It is the blessing of God and what we look forward to. But this will be frustrated, fractured by sin.

Appendix – Unexamined and Troublesome Ideas

- Do we work in heaven or not?
- What is God's work now?
- God's rule seen in the church, workplace, both?
- Telic nature of work?