

THE CENTRE FOR ENTERPRISE, MARKETS AND ETHICS

THEOLOGY AND THE MARKET SERIES

# WORK AS ENTERPRISE: RECOVERING A THEOLOGY OF WORK

RICHARD TURNBULL

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Contributors are free to debate the intellectual arguments and express opinions. These views are not necessarily those of CEME, its board or staff, but will we hope stimulate further discussion and reflection.



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## INTRODUCTION

Work matters because it is one of the most profound expressions of our humanity. Consequently, since humanity, for the Christian, is created in God's image, work is also a crucial matter of theological concern and investigation.

What, though, is 'work'? The question is not merely one of definition. There are issues of the nature, value, purpose and extent of work. If work is, in Christian theological terms, a reflection of the nature and character of God, then work can neither be restricted to paid employment nor to a particular timespan. Christian discipleship extends across the whole of life in both dimensions – latitudinally, there is nothing in life that can be excluded from Christian theology and, longitudinally, Christian spirituality extends from the beginning to the end of life. There are also further questions around whether work has intrinsic or merely instrumental value and whether the benefits of work extend further than the individual.

Work is, at the same time, problematic. The absence of work – at least in its remunerated form – may lead to economic and social dislocation. Work itself may be creative and innovative or routine grind and drudgery. The economic trajectory of work has been one of ever-increasing specialisation, with the attendant benefits for productivity and some complex challenges for the quality and nature of work itself. For the Christian theologian, work as toil is a result of the fall. The complex nature of work and its consequences are therefore proper areas of theological concern.

Work is not a static concept. Not only does the nature of work change over time but so does the ability of human beings to equip themselves with training, skills and knowledge – since humanity is created in God's image, this is unsurprising from a theological point of view, as human ingenuity, creativity and development reflect God's character as creator. There have been two significant periods of history in which the nature of work has changed dramatically and fundamentally. The first was from, say, 1760 to 1840, and is usually termed the Industrial Revolution. This extraordinary time in British history was characterised by the enormous movement of people from country to town and the concentrated deployment of capital in manufacturing and its mechanisation, with the resultant demand for labour but often in routine and highly pressured environments, giving rise to the possibilities of both innovation and alienation. The second period is the contemporary era, with the movement towards digitisation, artificial intelligence and a wide range of new technologies. This period too, sometimes portrayed as the Fourth Industrial Revolution,<sup>1</sup> has enormous implications for work, employment and leisure, not least with regard to new ways of working, such as the so-called, 'gig economy'. Although, theologically speaking, some observers are depressed about the prospects, and these developments raise significant and important issues for society (and the

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<sup>1</sup> Some commentators refer to four industrial revolutions. The first is the initial movement and deployment of capital in the late eighteenth and early to mid-nineteenth century. The second is the rapid mechanisation of process, engineering development and expansion of the mid-nineteenth to early twentieth century. The third is the more recent 'digital revolution', and the fourth is the harnessing of new technologies and artificial intelligence alongside the digital. The characterisations are useful in general terms.

redployment of both labour and capital does have consequences), we should be optimistic for the very reason that work reflects God's image and purpose for humanity.

For Darrell Cosden, 'Work is a notoriously difficult concept to define',<sup>2</sup> a view with which David Miller, in turn quoting the editor of *The Oxford Book of Work*, concurs: 'Work is harder to define than one might think.'<sup>3</sup> Certainly, one aspect of work relates to economic productivity, but for theology this is a necessary but not sufficient condition. Work may refer to location, activity or instrumental purpose. There is, however, also an end or purpose to work. So Miller proceeds to define work as 'human activity that has both intrinsic and extrinsic value' and that is discharged both for reward and as an expression of purpose.<sup>4</sup> Pope John Paul II, in *Laborem Exercens* (1981), refers to work in terms of the activity through which humanity earns its daily bread.<sup>5</sup> Miroslav Volf describes work as 'social activity', designed to create products or states of affairs that satisfy the needs of the work and others.<sup>6</sup> The approaches here of the Pope and of Volf, while not the sum total of the writers' observations, are essentially instrumental approaches – we work to provide for our needs.

In his *The Pleasures and the Sorrows of Work*, Alain de Botton describes a group of ship-spotters observing a ship and its cargo from the end of a pier in enormous detail; how this gives them insight into origins, purposes and destinations in a way of which most of us are largely ignorant:

I was inspired by the men at the pier to attempt a hymn to the intelligence, peculiarity, beauty and horror of the modern workplace and, not least, its extraordinary claim to be able to provide us, alongside love, with the principal source of life's meaning.<sup>7</sup>

The meaning of work, its beauty, purpose and destiny are central to theological reflection. The complexity of work, issues of ethics and responsibility, are equally matters of theology. Work is creative, redemptive and transformative. Enterprise is itself an intensely theological concept and directly related to ideas of work. Jeff Van Duzer refers to work as value creation, and says that we are called to 'participate in innovative and industrious work'.<sup>8</sup> Pope Paul VI, in *Populorum Progressio* (1967), refers to humanity as gradually uncovering 'the hidden laws of nature' and writes that humanity 'is stimulated to undertake new investigations and fresh discoveries, to take prudent risks and launch new ventures'.<sup>9</sup>

So can we define work? Put simply, we might say that work is: 'Any activity that reflects human enterprise imbued with intrinsic purpose and meaning and intended to provide for individuals,

2 Darrell Cosden, *A Theology of Work: Work and the New Creation* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 2004), p. 9.

3 David W. Miller, *God at Work: The History and Promise of the Faith at Work Movement* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 18, quoting Keith Thomas (ed.), *The Oxford Book of Work* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. xiii.

4 Ibid., p. 19.

5 Pope John Paul II, *Laborem Exercens*, para. 1.1.

6 Miroslav Volf, *Work in the Spirit: Toward a Theology of Work* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), pp. 10–11.

7 Alain de Botton, *The Pleasures and Sorrows of Work* (London: Penguin, 2010, 2015), p. 30.

8 Jeff Van Duzer, *Why Business Matters to God: (And What Still Needs to be Fixed)* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2010), p. 47.

9 Pope Paul VI, *Populorum Progressio*, para. 25.

families and society'. This allows for paid and unpaid work, reflects wealth creation and enterprise and is functional but not restricted to the individual.

Work is a deeply theological concept.

## CHAPTER 1

### APPROACHES TO A THEOLOGY OF WORK

There is a long history of approaches to the theology of work across the Christian traditions. This chapter will review, in outline terms, the key aspects of method and outlook adopted by the Roman Catholic Church, the historic Protestant tradition and some contemporary approaches.

Roman Catholicism, both in its wider reflections on Christian social thought and, more formally, in papal encyclicals, has developed a significant corpus of teaching in and around the subject of work. Although the publication by Pope Leo XIII of *Rerum Novarum* in 1891 is seen as the beginning of modern Catholic thinking in the area, clearly there is a prior history to the understanding of work.

Rodger Charles reminds us of this history in his two-volume *Christian Social Witness and Teaching*,<sup>1</sup> with consideration of not only the biblical material but also aspects of work in the classical world and through to the medieval period. Some elements of the biblical corpus will emerge in later chapters, not least in relation to creation and covenant. Charles, though, brings out the tension between work as part of God's original creation mandate and the protections provided under the Mosaic law following the fall as work was corrupted. Much practical and theological thinking derives from the exploration of this tension; Charles points out how labour was blessed and commended but that cheating and exploitation were regulated.<sup>2</sup> He adds by way of further example that Jesus and his apostles all worked and that some of Jesus' disciples were clearly of some means – the fruits of their labours;<sup>3</sup> Paul, likewise, is an example as a tentmaker, and indeed, Charles says, the apostle commanded 'useful work'.<sup>4</sup> In the classical world, work was a complex phenomenon. Cicero regarded wages as slavery;<sup>5</sup> slaves worked, citizens attended to political affairs and free workers were in effect degraded by undertaking the work of a slave. The crucial development in thinking about work in the medieval period was the development of the monastery. The Rule of Benedict commands several hours of manual labour daily, since 'idleness is the enemy of the soul'.<sup>6</sup> The monastery was a community of work; the land was worked both to provide for the monks and indeed to generate income for the house. Francis of Assisi wished that all his 'brothers and sisters should work at some honourable trade'.<sup>7</sup>

*Rerum Novarum* did not appear in a vacuum. The background was that of industrialisation, the complexities of poverty, the rise of socialism and conflict between employer and employee. Cardinal Manning, the Archbishop of Westminster, had been involved in mediation during the London dock strike of 1889. *Rerum Novarum* rejected socialism and affirmed private property as the

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1 Rodger Charles, *Christian Social Witness and Teaching: The Catholic Tradition from Genesis to Centesimus Annus*, 2 vols (Leominster: Gracewing, 1998, 2006).

2 Charles, *Christian Social Witness*, vol. 1, p. 22.

3 Ibid., p. 40.

4 Ibid., p. 42, referring to Ephesians 4.28.

5 Ibid, p. 49, n. 21.

6 Rule of Benedict, ch. 48.

7 Quoted in Charles, *Christian Social Witness*, vol. 1, p. 217.