

WHERE'S GOD ON MONDAY?

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Alistair Mackenzie and Wayne Kirkland

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Introduction

WHERE'S GOD ON MONDAY?

Roger is a workaholic. He wouldn't admit it, but his life certainly bears the fruit of it. Roger is also a Christian and feels a deep sense of call to his profession – law. The work of a demanding practice means that 70-to-80-hour weeks are the norm for Roger. But he also contributes in the church that he and his family is a part of. He's on several committees, leads worship and a home group, and is prominent in many other ways.

People who know Roger certainly esteem him highly. He's incredibly busy doing important work, making a major contribution to God's kingdom. At least that's what both Roger and his friends believe.

But there's another side to him, which is not so obvious. Roger finds it difficult to say no. He's desperate for people's approval and affirmation and, as a result, is close to burn-out. So is his family. His wife Colleen is resigned to things always being this way, even in "retirement". She copes as best she can and carries the extra load in parenting and household tasks. Secretly she dreams of getting off the treadmill they're on, but deep down she knows Roger would either quickly die ... or find another equally demanding treadmill to leap onto!

Karen is married to Steve and is mother to three growing boys. Before having children she was a secretary in a busy office. Highly skilled, she used to find conversation easy at dinner parties and when meeting new people.

But now, several years on, she doesn't know what to say when people ask, "Do you work?" Though she uses the positive reply, "I'm a fulltime mother," she detects a certain lack of interest – sometimes almost disparagement. Not only does Karen believe she is undervalued by her peers for a task she feels passionately about, but there is no easy way to describe the myriad of other ways she contributes during the week – like the voluntary work at school, in the community and through friendships.

On top of all of this, Karen is feeling no small amount of peer pressure to "get a job" – like all of her friends who are now "going back to work". However, she and Steve both feel that the time is not right, and that the benefits of having one of them at home for the children are worth the cost.

Joseph works in a bank, but he's not intending to stick around too long. He's frustrated by the limitations put on his witness, and has plans to get into "fulltime Christian service". He feels called to pastoring and regards the job at the bank as a way to earn the dollars needed to go to Bible college.

Joseph has been particularly inspired by a couple of visiting preachers who've encouraged him to "aim high" and not settle for second-best. He could be so much more effective for the Lord, he feels, by giving all his time and energy to pastoring. The elders in his church have been very

supportive of this aim, giving him opportunity to try his hand at preaching and involving him in other areas of leadership within the church.

Mark faces a dilemma. He's a middle manager, and the demands his employer is placing on him are getting bigger every year. More responsibility, harder deadlines, better results – these are what the bosses seem to be after.

Trying to add family commitments (he has a wife and two young children) and church involvement, is creating an unbearable burden. Already he leaves home at 6.45am to beat the rush-hour traffic, and gets home around 7pm, just in time to put the kids to bed. He regularly takes work home nights and weekends.

Mark is caught in a bind. He knows that if he slackens off on his “work” his job will be at risk. But the worst thing is that his job is so all-consuming. Outside of “work hours” he finds it difficult to give people his full attention. He just doesn't have the energy for proper preparation of his home-group sessions, or for spending time with his kids and wife ... much less getting involved in a club or community activity.

He feels guilty about all this, but doesn't know what to do. Church doesn't help – particularly Sunday services, which seem totally unrelated to his “real life”, almost as if they're in a different world.

Julie is unemployed. At least that's how the Department of Statistics lists her.

It hasn't always been this way. Five years ago she was made redundant and hasn't been able to find a job since. Julie suspects it's because of her age. No one really wants to employ a 58-year-old. In spite of her best attempts to keep positive, five years of job interviews, rejection letters and telling people she's “between jobs” have worn her down. Julie is now hanging out for retirement.

Sadly, her confidence and self-esteem are so undermined that she doesn't see how much potential there is for her to contribute on a voluntary basis. Her skills would be snapped up by church or community organizations, but she is careful not to get actively involved in the ones she has links with. Julie regards them more as a “fill-in” – second-best to a “real job”.

The Sunday-Monday split

Five people – all Christians, struggling with what it means to work and follow Jesus.

The issues are many – and complex. This book seeks to give some perspectives for the Karens and Marks and Rogers – and many others who genuinely want to be faithful to Jesus in all they do, yet struggle to know how to do this in their daily work.

They are representative of hundreds of Christians we have spoken with over the years. In fact, the Epilogue to this book shares how many of these conversations have contributed to us writing this book.

The sad truth is that much of our church life completely ignores the subject of daily work, as if what people do for most of their week has little connection with their faith. As Calvin Redekop has noted, the truth is that the average Christian spends less than 2 percent of his or her waking time at church and most of their time working. Yet the church puts most of its energy and resources into that 2 percent and very little into the world of daily work.

Work is the dominant activity of our everyday lives and yet so often our work and worship end up having little to do with each other. An enormous chasm lies between the worlds of Sunday and Monday.

So much for the problem. What about some solutions?

Where's God on Monday? is a starting point. It grapples with some of the issues – from a biblical perspective. And it's not some pie-in-the-sky theologizing we're aiming for, but rather, intensely practical and tangible outworkings for our day-to-day work.

To help you earth matters in your own work context, we've developed some exercises and questions at the end of each chapter. They are useful for both individual and group reflection.

However, before we go any further, there's a fundamental issue we need to address: how we understand and use the word "work".

Who is working?

Imagine this scene: It's 6pm and John walks through the front entrance of the house he shares with Liz, his wife, and their three children. He puts down his briefcase and Liz immediately gives him a kiss, inquiring, "How was your *day at work*, dear?"

John automatically knows what his wife is asking. He's employed as an accountant for forty hours a week at a firm downtown. Liz is asking him how his *paid job* went today. After a short commentary on the office politics and a struggle sorting out a client's books, John returns the favor by asking Liz, "So how was your *day at home*?"

John never thinks to ask, "How was your *day of work at home*?" Liz knows she has also been working today. And we hope John doesn't think she has just been lazing around or resting while he's been gone! Taking care of three young active boys, looking after the house and the meals, volunteering at the boys' school – all these activities have filled Liz's day. Liz has actually been working hard but the words John uses don't overtly acknowledge this.

Unfortunately, when we use the word "work" we usually refer to paid employment. However, for most people this is only part of their daily work and for others like Liz, their work doesn't include any paid work at all. Sadly, the value of "paid" work is generally assumed to be of much greater importance than any unpaid tasks or roles we perform. This is not how it should be.

A cultural dilemma

When it comes to defining work in our culture, we have a real problem. The word "work" has become almost totally defined by paid employment. When we meet someone for the first time,

and that person asks what we “do”, we usually reply, “I’m a builder” or “I work for Telecom”. Instinctively we know that the question really means, “What is your paid employment?”

More than anything else, the matter of “employment” defines who we are in the eyes of our culture. Yet, as Christians, do we really believe that? Surely there are more important ways of identifying *who* we are. And what about those who, for any reason, don’t have a paid job? They will tell you (and if you are such a person you will know only too well) that this question is disturbingly awkward to answer. Worse, it raises fearful questions about their own self-worth which many people are unable to face up to.

Defining “work” biblically

This narrow view of work is problematic when we come to examining the scriptures. The biblical writers lived in a tightly connected and closely integrated society. Their life was one where home and employment, relationships and activities were not separate spheres, but had real and obvious everyday connections.

Our fragmented and highly compartmentalized world doesn’t connect well with that society. If we are to read the scriptures with an understanding of their full meaning, we need to develop a much broader, holistic definition of work. Here are a couple of examples of people attempting to do this.

Paul Marshall defines work as *“human activity designed to accomplish something that is needed, as distinct from activity that is satisfying in itself.”*¹

John Stott suggests that work is *“the expenditure of energy (manual or mental or both) in the service of others, which brings fulfillment to the worker, benefit to the community and glory to God”*.²

There are obviously a number of ways to nail down what we mean by work. Let’s not get hung up on the detail, but simply note that by seeing work as much broader than paid employment we will understand more thoroughly the biblical references to this topic.

Am I working when I read to my daughter in bed? In a sense I am. I may find it dull and unstimulating – or pleasant and fulfilling. Either way there’s a degree of expended energy involved, and it’s a very important task in the overall goal of raising and discipling my daughter.

What about when I attend a school or community committee? Or when my elderly neighbor needs help with her groceries? Or when a friend has just lost a brother through death and needs someone to be there – to sit with him and listen?

You bet! Some may be instinctive responses to people in need, others may be quite deliberately planned; some may seem effortless and “self-rewarding”, others may be a real chore and require major application ... but all of these “tasks” are work.

¹ Paul Marshall’s article on “Work” in *New Dictionary of Christian Ethics and Pastoral Theology* (IVP: Downers Grove, 1995), 899.

² John Stott, *Issues Facing Christians Today* (Marshalls: Basingstoke, UK, 1984), 162.

Students work. Superannuiants work. Stay-at-home parents work. “Unemployed” people work. We all work. It’s the dominant activity of our everyday lives, consuming the majority of our waking hours.

Whether or not we get paid for the task is somewhat irrelevant – at least insofar as whether it counts for work. So over the next few pages, when you read the word “work”, make sure you include all productive activities you engage in on a weekly basis.

UP CLOSE & PERSONAL

1. Which statements from the five profiles above do you identify with? (You might like to read them through again and underline anything that sounds like you.)
2. What conflicts are you aware of at the moment between your church life and your everyday activities?
3. As a group, try to come up with a definition of work that satisfies everyone.
4. When someone asks you what you “do”, what do you usually say? Is it difficult or easy for you to answer this question when you are asked? What are practical ways you could change the way you think and talk about “work”, to incorporate a wider definition of it?
5. If Jesus joined you each week and worked alongside you in your Monday-to-Saturday activities (remember: he was a tradesman himself), would that make any difference to the way you do your daily work? What sort of difference?
6. Share with your group members the list you have made in the Exercise below. As people read their lists, take care to notice the diversity of their activities.

Exercise

Make a list below of all the tasks you do and the roles you play in a standard week. Be sure to cover *all* the paid and unpaid tasks – including domestic chores, community and church involvement, parenting etc. (Note: subsequent exercises in this book will regularly refer back to this list, so make sure you take time to be as comprehensive as possible.)

- Which of these tasks do you normally refer to as “work”? Why these ones and not the others on the list?
- Choose two tasks from your list that you enjoy most, and two you enjoy least. Why the difference?

Chapter 1 GOD'S CREATIVE WORK ... how work began

Where did work come from? Who invented it? Or is it just a consequence of the Fall? Perhaps it was a punishment God laid on sinful humans?

There are certainly times when we all feel that way. Particularly when work seems so hard and frustrating. However, the biblical reality is quite different.

God is a worker

The Bible leaves us with the unmistakable message that, right from the beginning of time, work is good. Why? Because Genesis 1 is really an account of work – embarked on by God, and obviously very satisfying to him. As Eugene Peterson writes:

*The Bible begins with the announcement, “In the beginning God created.” Not “sat majestic in the heavens”. He created. He did something. He made something. He fashioned heaven and earth. The week of creation was a week of work.*³

An interesting exercise is to read through the first two chapters of Genesis, highlighting all the verbs that describe activities engaged in by God or others. You'll soon discover the breadth of God's work habits and the range of his creative genius.

Think of the fun God must have had dreaming up and making stuff that never existed before. What a wild imagination! God is intensely innovative and his development of Planet Earth (to say nothing of the rest of the universe) is thoroughly ground-breaking. In making the land and sea, a million varieties of living creatures, night and day, trees and plants by the score, and much more, God shows himself to be the ultimate trailblazer. A master craftsman.

Now here's an important point: if being creative is core to who God is, then it's clear that God did not stop creating after Genesis 1 & 2. His creative energies are still being applied. For example, we know from scientists that the universe continues to grow. There are galaxies being added all the time. And we must assume there are countless other ways his creativity is being expressed, even as you read this – like all the totally unique babies being born around the world right this minute.

In fact, it's interesting to observe, as Robert Banks notes in his book, *God the Worker*, the number of images used throughout Scripture to describe aspects of God's work, such as shepherd, potter/craftsman, builder and architect, weaver, gardener, farmer, musician and artist.⁴

³ Eugene Peterson, *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction* (IVP: Downers Grove, 1980), 104.

⁴ Robert Banks, *God The Worker* (Albatross: Sutherland, NSW, 1992).

So here in Genesis, right at the very beginning of the Bible, we are faced with the truth that God himself is a worker. Purposeful activity is an intrinsic part of God's character and nature.⁵

Creation – born to work in partnership with God

God's creative work tells us much about who he is and what he is like. The picture may not be complete, but it does give us a glimpse of his character. This is particularly so in God's act of creating men and women – the ultimate expression of his creativity – a point well captured by the Psalmist, who congratulates God for making us so wonderfully unique and complex – both inside and out (Ps 139).

In fact, God states in Genesis 1:26, "*Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness...*" This tells us much about ourselves. We have been made to resemble and reflect who God is. Therefore, because work is part of God's nature, he clearly intends it to be part of ours as well. In other words, we are workers because we are made in the image of a God who works. It's in our genes. Like Father, like sons and daughters; we too need to be engaged in creative and purposeful activities. Deprived of this opportunity we are robbed of something essential for our wellbeing. Think how you feel when you have nothing to do and time lies heavy on your hands!

But our involvement in work is not simply for our own benefit. God has a job for us – he wants our help in achieving his purposes. His intention is for us to become his co-workers. The mandate God gave Adam and Eve was to *share in his work*. At the very beginning God was prepared to entrust the garden to humans.⁶

Having been "made in God's image", we are called to be God's representatives. We are God's hands and feet working in partnership with God in his world.

In the Creation narrative of Genesis 1, this is expressed in God's command to "*fill the earth and subdue it*" and to "*have dominion*" over all living things. This stewardship role is a call for humans to work *with* God using our abilities, time, and possessions to further God's purposes. Because of this, the value and significance of our work is directly related to how connected it is with God's work.

We find further expressions of this partnership in Genesis 2, in the story about the planting of the garden and the naming of the animals. Here God is the landscaper who designs the garden and plants trees that are both economically functional ("*good for food*") and aesthetically pleasing ("*pleasant to the sight*"). Clearly the value of work should not be measured by economic criteria alone.

Then we are told that God placed a person in the garden to "*till it and to keep it*" ... to cultivate and to conserve. Thus God's creative work is linked with *our* creativity – a creativity that is designed both to preserve what God has given and to build on it through further creative

⁵ Clearly, work is not the sum total of what God is "into". Genesis 2:2 tells us that "...*God...rested on the seventh day from all the work that he had done.*" This is not because he exhausted himself, but rather to enjoy what he had created. Rest complements work and indeed work only makes sense in the light of rest.

⁶ It's interesting to note that God creates Eve to be a helper to Adam. She is to help Adam fulfil the responsibilities God had entrusted him with.

ventures, using the resources that God has provided. The “tilling” suggests that we have a role to play in helping prepare things so that the potential for growth which God has placed in them can be realized.

In the story of the naming of the animals we find God creating animals and birds, then parading them past the man so that he can name them. The man is invited to add his creativity to God’s. *“Whatever the man called every living creature, that was its name”*. Given the significance of naming in Hebrew culture, clearly the man is delegated both real responsibility and great freedom.

Conclusions

In summary then, we can say that:

- Work is good. If God does it, it must be okay.
- We are meant to be God’s co-workers and help bring about God’s purposes.
- God intends for us to share responsibility and exercise our creativity.
- The value and significance of our work is directly dependent on its connection with God’s work.

UP CLOSE & PERSONAL

1. Read through the first two chapters of Genesis, highlighting all the verbs (“doing” words) that describe activities engaged in by God. Make a list of them. Describe the range of God’s work.
2. Now read through the first two chapters of Genesis again, highlighting all words that talk about human work. How are these tasks related to God’s work? What similarities or connections can you see between these tasks and the work you do?
3. Is *all* work good?

Exercise

Look back over the list of work – tasks and roles – you made at the end of the Introduction.

- Can you see any of the activities engaged in by God, reflected in your work?
- What opportunities do the tasks you undertake give you to be creative?

Chapter 2

CORRUPTED WORK

... what went wrong?

Corrupted computer files are a sad reality of digital technology. After working hard to craft a document, it can be devastating to open the file sometime later and discover that things are no longer as they were created. A virus has worked its way in and while we may still be able to decipher the basic shape and outline of the document, it's no longer what it was meant to be.

As we know, the story of Genesis is a bit like that. God's vision for his creation – and for humanity, was stunning and beautiful. The first humans must have been in their element.

And then...disaster!

The events of Genesis 3 have had a profound and lasting effect on work. It's no surprise that this damage shows up so clearly – and so painfully – in the area of work.

“Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat food from it all the days of your life. It will produce thorns and thistles for you, and you will eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground...” (Gen 3:17-19)

Hardly a pleasant prospect. No wonder so many of us avoid spending time in the garden!

However, the negative impact of the “Great Rebellion” had much wider implications than just growing food. All four fundamental relationships and their connection to our work, were significantly corrupted – our relationship with God, with ourselves, with others, and with the rest of creation.

1. Our relationship with God

In the pre-Fall days, Adam and Eve were at one with God the Trinity. Not only did they enjoy absolute intimacy, but the tasks they were given were full of value and dignity. They worked as partners with God. Consequently, everything in life was sacred because everything had something of the touch of God on it. Nothing was “disconnected”.

Since the Fall, we humans have struggled to discover the connection (and therefore significance) between the work we have been commissioned to do, and God. Because we have rebelled against God, the fulfillment and purpose of our work is seriously eroded. The problem is that we yearn to work in partnership with God, yet we insist on doing our own thing.

No wonder then that what happens on Sundays is frequently so “unreal” and even irrelevant to our lives during the rest of the week. Many of our friends notice the divide more and more as they grow older. Several of them have left the church altogether, because they couldn't see the point. For them religious activities, especially the “worship service” on Sunday, felt so totally out of touch with “real life”.

Others of us have lost sight of God’s role for us in his world. We may thrive in the “church atmosphere”, but simply “put up” with our paid employment – treating it only as a way to make a buck and get on with “really living” in the company of our fellow believers.

Losing touch with the church God calls, or losing touch with the world God loves – which is worse?

2. Our relationship with ourselves

The Fall also directly affects our relationship with ourselves. In the early days of creation Adam and Eve were at peace with themselves, confident in the roles entrusted to them. There was a sense of dignity and fulfillment in being God’s co-workers. The work they did was a part of God’s blessing and enabled them to flourish.

However, now we constantly find ourselves battling to discover where we “fit”. This is no longer automatic and it is hardly surprising that being out of step with God, we struggle to find our identity as workers. Tasks don’t effortlessly fit our unique mix of motivations, giftings, and temperament. We often even have little understanding of ourselves – how we are made and what tasks are best for us.

How many times do we catch ourselves (or others) saying, “This job is just not me,” or “I really like my work but it would be so much better if I didn’t have to do this or that task”? We’re rarely satisfied and fulfilled in what we do. Those who richly enjoy their work are very much the exception to the rule – and if they do they often end up consumed by their work. For most of us our work often seems futile or just plain hard work and toil. In a word: far from life giving.

As a result, some of us become compulsive workers, while others find every day a dreary treadmill. Workaholism or meaninglessness – life often seems to oscillate between these two extremes, as we desperately search to find the balance. Too often this confusion dictates the way we value ourselves. Rather than our identity being rooted in our relationships with God and others, it becomes bound up with our work.⁷

3. Our relationship with others

Honesty, transparency, care, and compassion were all marks of relationships before the Fall. Work built friendship and community. However, since then our working lives have become contaminated by all sorts of distractions – blame-shifting, power struggles, deceit, greed, dishonesty, selfishness, stress...

Relationships in our work have been deeply affected – particularly by the lack of trust between people. For it is trust and respect that is the oil in working relationships.

And this trust has been subverted further in recent decades through the economic rationalizing that has taken place to increase productivity. This has often resulted in the erosion of trust between employees and employers. Unfortunately, in this less secure environment employees frequently find themselves competing with each other to bolster their own job security. As these

⁷ We’ll look more extensively at these two tendencies in Chapter 9 (Work as Worship).

pressures increase, workplace relationships come under more stress. Trying to get along with a diverse group of people is challenge enough without these additional pressures.

This problem of relationships complicates the issue of work. Often our discontent is not with the job itself – but with the people we have to work alongside! Their personal struggles (and our own), and the inter-personal conflicts that inevitably follow, are yet another result of the Great Rebellion.

4. Our relationship with the rest of Creation

The Creation story speaks of a world where harmony between created beings was the norm. In this environment, humans were commissioned to care for and steward the animal life and natural resources. The Fall dramatically disturbed this equilibrium. Our greed and ignorance have led to all manner of ecological disasters – and the mistreatment of countless other living species.

The result is everywhere to be seen. Pollution haunts our communities. We waste limited resources. When we strip the land of trees for farming we find the result is erosion and floods. When we introduce exotic species we upset the balance of nature in a different climate. When we factory farm, over-fish, and generally treat the birds, sea life, and animals with whom we share the Earth, with such contempt, the damage is immense.

We were commanded to conserve and cultivate; too often we abuse and exploit.

Finding the balance

Much (though not all) of the damage created by sin is repairable – particularly if people have the will to co-operate with others and with God. Nevertheless, this does produce a built-in tension between frustration and satisfaction. There is the potential for work to be deeply satisfying, but also for it to be full of despair and futility. We'll look more extensively at this in Chapter 6.

We should be neither resigned to toilsome work ... nor triumphalistic. It's only too easy to sideline ourselves from the rest of our fellow-workers, fooling ourselves that we don't have any problem. This form of super-spirituality can lead us to understate the ongoing struggle that we all go through as we try to discover meaning and significance in what we do.

UP CLOSE & PERSONAL

1. How has the Fall (or Great Rebellion) impacted on your work (think about more than just paid employment)? For example, how disconnected is your faith from your work? What about your Sunday/Monday connection?
2. If you could change one thing about your employment, what would it be?
3. How dependent are you on work for your sense of self-worth? If you were suddenly unemployed, how would you cope? What other areas of your present life would give you a feeling of self-esteem? Or are there other areas you should seriously cultivate, in order to balance your life?

4. How much stress do you feel is caused in your places of work by poor relationships? In what ways does this impact your capacity to do your tasks well?
5. What examples can you think of where greed, blame-shifting, deceit, dishonesty, selfishness, power struggles, lack of thoughtfulness for others ... have been in evidence in your places of work?
6. What factors foster trust and respect between people in a workplace? Can you think of particular examples where there has been a breakdown of trust and respect between people? What difference did this make?
7. If you work in a relatively warm and friendly environment, what do you think are the key ingredients that make it that way? Do good relationships influence productivity? Or are there advantages in competition between workers?

Exercise

Refer back to the list you made at the end of the Introduction.

- How well do you feel the tasks you are asked to do fit your own particular mix of personality/temperament/giftings?
- What tasks do you revel in and which ones do you find unappealing and frustrating?
- Are there any aspects of your work or work environment, where Creation is abused or exploited in some way?

Chapter 3

GOD'S TRANSFORMING WORK

... a restoration job

A good friend of Wayne's is a classic hoarder – but with a difference. He takes great delight in recycling used engine oil and discarded plastic containers, producing in the process new objects, items, gizmos, gadgets and doohickeys! His creativity and vision is amazing. Material that would normally end up at the tip, most of it not biodegradable, is “redeemed”. This person's industry transforms some items into things of beauty, others into articles of usefulness. In a small way he is participating in God's intention to redeem his creation.

“Redeem” is a word that early Christian writers quickly adopted. In its original sense (the Latin verb *redimere* – one of its forms is *redemptum*) it means “to buy back, release, ransom”, and is used of prisoners, slaves, etc. This was the perfect metaphor for the way God saved us while we were still sinners, through the sacrifice of Jesus.

Many of us have been taught that redemption refers only to people's “souls”. But the Bible makes it clear that God is in the business of putting right the *whole* Cosmos. As Paul states in Colossians 1:

He (Jesus) was supreme in the beginning and – leading the resurrection parade – he is supreme in the end. From beginning to end he's there, towering far above everything, everyone. So spacious is he, so roomy, that everything of God finds its proper place in him without overcrowding. Not only that, but all the broken and dislocated pieces of the universe – people and things, animals and atoms – get properly fixed and fit together in vibrant harmonies, all because of his death, his blood that poured down from the Cross.

You yourselves are a case study of what he does. At one time you all had your backs turned to God, thinking rebellious thoughts of him, giving him trouble every chance you got. But now, by giving himself completely at the Cross, actually dying for you, Christ brought you over to God's side and put your lives together, whole and holy in his presence.⁸

God's program for restoration is already in place. He intends to transform and redeem everything and everyone – all that he brought into being. God wants to bring order out of chaos, resolve conflict and restore relationships, and work for justice and just solutions in all situations.

In fact, God's redeeming work involves the restoration of all four foundational relationships – with Him, with ourselves, with each other, and with the rest of creation. Paul also addresses this in his letters to the Romans (8:18-23) and Ephesians (1:9-12).

God has no intention of disposing with Planet Earth after this age comes to a close. Like Wayne's friend, he's just not the throwaway type!

⁸ Eugene Peterson, *The Message* (NavPress: Colorado Springs, 1993), 422. Emphases are ours.

Everything we do to counter or reverse the effects of the Fall is a participation in God's redeeming and transforming work and looks forward to the completion of that work. We are invited to become agents and examples of Christ the Redeemer.

How should this affect our everyday work?

As we have already seen, work is a part of our humanity especially impacted by the Fall. It figures then, that it is also one of the things most in need of redemption. Some industries and professions leap to mind – the selling of cars or real estate or insurance, the spheres of politics and law and advertising. However, what about the more “caring” fields of work such as education, health, and social work? Do they also need redemption? Absolutely.

A curious feature of present-day Christian life is the way we treat certain industries or parts of society as “unclean” – as if we daren't get involved in them. We fear that our reputation might be tainted if we come too close. Much like the Pharisees whom Jesus criticized so severely.

Yet without getting our hands dirty and taking some risks, how can we hope to effectively partner God in his work of redemption? Jesus showed no such squeamishness when he purposefully involved himself with the undesirables of his time. His deliberate practice of associating with them earned him the accusation of being “... *a glutton and a drinker, a friend of tax collectors and sinners*” (Luke 7:34).

Yes, the real estate sales industry (for example) is often highly unredeemed. Maybe that's a good reason for Christians who have an authentic kingdom vision to get involved in it. The more unredeemed an area of society may be, the bigger the difference we might be able to make.

What kind of transformation is required?

Redemption though, from what? The best way to get a perspective on this is to think about any area of work and imagine what it would look like if God were able to have his way with it. Both on the macro and the micro level.

For example, when Wayne worked as a school trustee, he was responsible (along with a group of others) for the governance of an elementary school. The kind of questions he found himself grappling with were ones like: What might this school look like if God was able to make all the changes he wanted? How would it affect the attitudes of the staff and students, the “culture” of the school, the physical environment, the values and educational philosophy, teacher relationships, involvement of the wider community, the learning process, the sense of fulfillment of staff, times of celebration within the school community...?

The vision of a school community being redeemed by God inspired Wayne, as a parent and a trustee, helping him see where he might put my efforts. Of course, he had to learn to recognize the limitations of his “power” or influence to work for change. There were many factors outside his orbit – attitudes within the community, government policies and funding, quality of management and staff, etc. But this didn't need to lead to discouragement. For there was much change that Wayne, in conjunction with God and others, could work toward. And it was, after all, *God's* work of redemption. Wayne was just one of God's partners!

In all our roles and tasks we need to be prayerfully discerning. How can we (among other things)...

- Steward resources well
- Serve others with joy
- Employ God-given creativity
- Witness to God's truth
- Tell the truth and encourage such habits as honesty and integrity
- Bring healing, understanding, and reconciliation
- Build community, and promote peace and harmony
- Preserve and conserve
- Work for justice and peace-making
- Nurture and encourage others' gifts and character development?

These are all clear expressions of the character and on-going work of God.

Redeeming our own attitudes

However, it's not just what we put our hands to that requires transformation. Clearly, before we attempt to work with God towards redeeming the areas of society that we are involved in, we need to begin by allowing our own attitudes and values to be redeemed.

Do we really see the potential for good in what we do? Perhaps we should begin further back and ask, do we see any value and purpose in it at all? Many Christians regard paid employment as no more than an opportunity to earn money so that they can "do important other stuff". Others, while accepting the need for honesty and integrity, see the value of a job mainly in terms of the opportunity to "witness" to their non-Christian workmates or customers.

We do not want to diminish the significance of values like honesty and integrity, nor undermine the importance of witness. God is all for these. However, we believe that God intends to do more than simply "save souls". It is also his plan to transform those souls – *and* the world they dwell in. More to the point – he wants to transform *us*. And he wants us to be his partners in transforming his world. (This is a matter we'll look at in more depth in Chapter 10.)

It is often our attitude to our tasks and roles, which limits God. We are too ignorant of God's plans for his cosmos. We put little effort into thinking about his intentions for both us and the work we do. No wonder little connecting and transforming really takes place.

Try adopting the attitude that there is value and significance in every one of our roles and tasks. They are part of God's agenda for both us and his wider kingdom. God will use our involvement to transform us and others, and redeem the circumstances. He uses them to transform our attitudes, values, expectations, and relationships. Our gifts and abilities can be stretched, our character refined, vision enlarged, new possibilities discovered.

Limits to our role

We're not suggesting that each of us can hope to transform a whole industry or area of society by ourselves. Paid employees, for example, are often more limited in what they can change than employers.

Even so, we often underestimate our ability to make a significant difference in our small corner of the world. The data entry worker may not by herself be a force to be reckoned with in redeeming the banking industry, but she certainly has an opening to help grow community in the office, inspire others with her acts of compassion and love, push for better working conditions, build strong and trusting relationships between management and staff, and speak the truth in love. That's a whole lot of challenge for anyone's working week!

So while not all of us can bring about change on the macro level, we most certainly can at the micro. Unfortunately, few Christians are challenged or inspired about their role in either. So many missed opportunities! Often it's because we struggle to have a vision for what God *could* do, through us. For example:

A truck driver may easily belittle his own trade. What significance is there in trucking frozen goods from one place to another? But the truth is that transporting goods to where they are needed is a critically important service. Countries without a good transport infrastructure are plagued by shortages, famine, and suffering.

That, however, is just the beginning. If he thinks through his daily work, our truck driver may also be able to see the value in driving courteously, driving efficiently to conserve fuel, expressing God's care and love in the way he relates to people during the day, raising ethical issues with management such as accidentally unfrozen food that's resold, etc.

This is not simply an exercise to help the truck driver feel better about his work. Rather it helps make sense of how our daily tasks fit into God's call, how what *we* do contributes to his work of sustaining and redeeming the world.

Or think of **parents**. The task of parenting is a wonderful opportunity for both the discipling of children and for the parents' own growth. What is God's intention for family life, and for the development of children and teenagers? How should that change the way that the family relates, is disciplined (parents too!), does duties, celebrates, and has fun together? What can we do to give our children the best spiritual, emotional, and cultural growth? How can we prepare them to follow Christ and to make responsible decisions for themselves? How can we encourage them to grow in personal wholeness and in relationships – knowing that this will dramatically improve their role as people, and eventually as parents themselves?

These are just some of the issues of what we might call “redemptive parenting”.

We hope these examples help you to gain a glimpse of the immense possibilities in working with God. When we capture a vision of the breadth and depth of the transformation God wants to bring, it will make a huge difference to how we work. We'll come back to this very important matter of redemption in Chapter 10.

The End/Completion

So what's God's “end game” in all this? It's that his work of redemption will be completed. Everything and everyone will eventually be as God intended.

This raises an interesting question or two. What will the role of work be then – in the renewed earth? And what does the Bible mean when it talks about eternal rest?

At first glance, we might think of rest as simply refraining from work. But perhaps that is primarily because of the “toil factor” which exists as a result of the Fall. If work has been tainted by the appearance of sin, then we may feel we regularly need to escape it!

The real function of rest in our lives is to help us recover from times of toil ... and to prepare us for further work. Rest and recreation (or re-creation) are positive ideas, restoring us when used appropriately, but undermining us when over-indulged in.⁹

The picture of the afterlife that most of us have involves permanent inactivity – reinforced by images of a non-stop church service, or even an endless feast. However, there are indications that the eternal rest we are promised *will* involve work. For example, Isaiah, in writing about the new heavens and new earth, says:

“They will build houses and dwell in them; they will plant vineyards and eat their fruit... They will not labor in vain ... for they will be a people blessed by the Lord...” (Is 65: 21,25)

Here we are given a brief glimpse of a much more active and fulfilling eternity – not the passive role we are traditionally taught to associate with life beyond the grave. Work, but work of a quite different kind.

It’s true that the scriptures contain only brief references to work in the next life. But think again about the nature of God. The need to create is hardwired into us, because that is how God is. The need to extend ourselves and to achieve, to improve conditions and to perfect our surroundings – these are an integral and essential part of who we are, made in God’s image. And the commission right back in the Genesis story, to “till and keep” – to manage God’s creation, remains. We can be confident that work will continue to be part of our brief and that whatever the work God challenges us with, will be supremely invigorating and energizing.

Isn’t this an encouragement to grow and prepare ourselves for that future ... here and now, in our present work? God grant us the vision and courage to partner him in bringing about transformation in this life. For it is a taste of things to come.

UP CLOSE & PERSONAL

1. Why do you think we often have such a truncated or reduced understanding of “redemption”? Are there other biblical words or concepts that might help to enlarge our understanding of what needs to be transformed?

⁹ We’ll look closer at the role of rest in Chapter 6.

2. Are there any industries/occupations that you think are un-redeemable? Make a list of them and then explain your reasons for thinking this way.
3. What industries do you think it would be particularly challenging for Christians to work in and attempt to transform? Why?
4. Take some time to read Isaiah 65:17-25 (Isaiah's description of the new creation). What impacts you most about this?

Exercise

Look back over your list of tasks and roles at the end of the Introduction:

Identify the ones that offer you opportunity to:

- Steward resources well
- Serve others with joy
- Employ God-given creativity
- Witness to God's truth
- Tell the truth and encourage such habits as honesty and integrity
- Bring healing, understanding, and reconciliation
- Build community, and promote peace and harmony
- Preserve and conserve
- Work for justice and peace-making
- Nurture and encourage others' gifts and character development?

List features of your weekly work that are personally enriching to you.

Chapter 4 GOD'S MAINTENANCE WORK ... redeeming the mundane

Wayne's upstairs home office has a splendid vista looking out over trees to the hills beyond. And when he goes downstairs, the view is even better – a backyard full of beautiful gardens, trees and grass. He often marvels at the creative genius of God and his co-workers (such as his wife, Jill!) who have created such beauty and inspiration.

But nothing ever stays the same. The splendor of the view also reminds him of things that need doing – lawns to mow, trees to prune, fences to rebuild or paint, a house to wash and gardens to weed. If he could just get the benefit of the great surroundings without having to constantly tidy up, things would be perfect!

This, of course, is the reality of living in God's created world. A world full of beauty and wonder is also a world of both growth and decay. Maintenance is part of the deal.

And that's true for God as well. Sometimes we assume that God's work ended the day the cosmos – his great creative masterpiece – was finished. But his responsibility did not stop there. He is still hard at work sustaining life in our universe. Much like the work required in order to maintain a beautiful garden, God's ongoing attention is required. He is not some remote creator who has lost interest in his universe.

God's "providence"

For many centuries Christians have used the word "providence" to describe this involvement. Simply put, the universe continues to depend on the continuing touch of its Creator every moment to maintain its existence. If God stopped working, our universe would disintegrate. His providence is what allows our world to continue.

Alec Motyer, in his exploration of the meaning of Isaiah 42:5-6, puts it this way – "*The power which called everything into being keeps it in being*".¹⁰

The Bible backs this up. For example, the writer of Hebrews states in 1:3 that the Son is "... *sustaining all things by his powerful word*", while Paul comments in Colossians 1:17, "*In him [the Son] all things hold together*". Peter expresses this same thought somewhat differently when he writes, "*By the same word the present heavens and earth are reserved for fire, being kept for the day of judgment ...*" (2 Peter 3:7).

Job 34:14 and Psalm 104:29 also say in different words that if God ceased to breathe his life into us we would immediately return to dust. A sobering thought.

Of course this activity of God's does not appear nearly as dramatic as those initial acts of creation. This is more like God's housekeeping work. But nevertheless without his continuing

¹⁰ J.A. Motyer, *The Prophecy of Isaiah* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1993), 321.

involvement in this way, life would cease, chaos would reign, and the universe would disintegrate.

This sustaining work is different from the redeeming work that we considered in the previous chapter, though they inevitably overlap. Redeeming work seeks to transform a negative situation and make it better, never settling for the status quo. Sustaining work maintains life by preserving the status quo. Both are important.

Practicing God's presence

One of the main ways God maintains life on this planet is through our work – tasks such as cleaning, painting, repairing, even putting out the rubbish! These often boring, routine chores hardly seem like spiritual tasks. But they are – even if practicing the presence of God in the midst of the mundane does not come automatically.

We all find it easy to see God at work in miraculous events, but less so in everyday ones. Unfortunately, as a result we end up with a much-reduced vision of God and his work. And sadly, it's also a very limited vision of the significance of our own daily work. We fail to see it through God's eyes.

Cultivating, growing, picking, preparing, cooking, parenting, nurturing, educating, collecting, counting, administering, distributing, transporting, testing, preserving, cleaning, serving... all of these activities, and many more, are examples of our sustaining work. They are, therefore, part of God's maintenance work too.

These tasks all have value and significance. If I don't mow the lawns, repair the fences, paint the house and trim the trees, our backyard will soon become overgrown and our house will rot and decay. This work is an important part of my role as a steward of God's creation. And it's only as I begin to recognize the role these tasks play in sustaining life that I am able to infuse them with the dignity they deserve.

If I'm really going to recapture a sense of God in the midst of the mundane I will need to develop a new kind of everyday spirituality, and a new sense of awe in the ordinary. I'll need to recognize God at work in every set of circumstances, with no part of life untouched by his presence, or excluded from his purposes.

God's work of restraint

There's another aspect to God's sustaining work. It has to do with restraining evil in our world. We looked briefly at the impact of the Fall on the world of work in a previous chapter. But part of God's work is also to hold evil in check and to limit the extent of harm and destruction it causes.

Here's where the command of Jesus to his followers to be salt in the world, makes real sense. Salt is a preservative and its presence enables food to remain good and wholesome for considerable periods of time. As God's co-workers, this is one of our roles.

Some ways in which our work is linked to this restraining aspect of God's work includes exercising discipline, developing legal restraints and rules, monitoring and enforcing laws, peacemaking, and holding things together when they threaten to fall apart.

To some people the extent of evil seems already too awful to contemplate and actually becomes a barrier to belief in the goodness of God. However, for others the mere fact that life continues with as many good experiences as we enjoy is witness to the restraining power of God at work in a world that would otherwise disintegrate. The chaos and anarchy in our world would be so much worse without God's restraining hand.

UP CLOSE & PERSONAL

1. How do you understand "providence"?
2. In what ways do you see God working now to sustain his creation?
3. Make a list of as many tasks and occupations as you can think of where the sustaining role of work is foremost.
4. In what ways do you see your personal work connected to God's sustaining work?
5. In what ways can you see your work and involvement as preservative (salt)?
6. *"To some people the extent of evil seems already too awful to contemplate and actually becomes a barrier to belief in the goodness of God. However, for others the mere fact that life continues with as many good experiences as we enjoy is witness to the restraining power of God at work in a world that would otherwise disintegrate."* What do you think about this?

Exercise

Refer back to the list of tasks and roles you made at the end of the Introduction.

- Mark the ones that are primarily maintenance tasks.
- Now mark the ones that are mundane tasks.
- Which tasks have you marked twice?

Spend some time reflecting on how you can value these the same way God does. How might you be able to view these tasks as spiritual exercises?

Chapter 5
FUTILE WORK
... struggle and frustration

The biblical writers are very realistic in their appraisal of what work can be like as a result of the Fall. Take Ecclesiastes, for example:

“I hated all the things I had toiled for under the sun, because I must leave them to the one who comes after me. And who knows whether that person will be wise or foolish? Yet they will have control over all the work into which I have poured my effort and skill under the sun. This too is meaningless. So my heart began to despair over all my toilsome labor under the sun. For a person may labor with wisdom, knowledge and skill, and then they must leave all they own to someone who has not toiled for it.

“...And I saw that all labor and all achievement spring from man’s envy of his neighbor. This too is meaningless, a chasing after the wind.” (Eccl. 2:18-21; 4:4).

Depressing stuff. Unfortunately, work can be incredibly tedious, frustrating and meaningless. And it is so for countless numbers of us. If we’re honest with ourselves, who hasn’t at some time asked the question, “What on earth am I doing this for?”

Deep down all of us want to be reassured that what we are toiling away at is going to count for something in the long term.

Meaninglessness can drive us to despair, and ultimately to insanity. The frequently told story of a Nazi concentration camp bears that out. A shrewd and sadistic camp commandant had a group of men toil all day long to shift a huge pile of dirt from one spot in the camp to another. The next day they were ordered to repeat the process – in reverse. On this went, day after day. The sheer meaninglessness of the task quickly wore those able-bodied prisoners down. It deeply affected their psyches and eventually destroyed their reason to live.

Often, unfortunately, we inflict this tragic fate on ourselves. Some of the world’s richest men and women have ended life despairing of all they have achieved. One even summed it up by saying, “I am the most miserable man on earth!”

Or what about Ramses II, perhaps the greatest of the ancient Egyptian pharaohs. His building program was one of the biggest and most extravagant of any ruler’s. The British poet Shelley wrote a poem about him, entitled “Ozymandias” (another name for Ramses).

This is what remains of all that Ramses invested his life in...

*I met a traveller from an antique land
Who said: Two vast and trunkless legs of stone
Stand in the desert. Near them on the sand,
Half sunk, a shattered visage lies, whose frown
And wrinkled lip and sneer of cold command*

*Tell that its sculptor well those passions read
Which yet survive, stamped on these lifeless things,
The hand that mocked them and the heart that fed;
And on the pedestal these words appear:
“My name is Ozymandias, king of kings:
Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!”
Nothing beside remains. Round the decay
Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare,
The lone and level sands stretch far away.*

Asking the difficult questions

Reading Ecclesiastes forces us to ask the difficult questions about the meaning of life – and of work. The writer, reflecting on his experience, has come to the conclusion that so much is frustrating, futile and meaningless, without a God-centered worldview.

Within his depressing honesty, there is clearly a warning for readers on the subject of work.

Investing in people, not things

The first warning is not to count on building monuments that will last forever. Neither great wealth nor great possessions will last the distance. The only thing worth investing in is people. If the writer of Ecclesiastes is indeed Solomon, then he certainly was writing from personal experience. Like Ramses, Solomon put a huge amount of energy into extensive building programs, and his wealth grew enormously throughout his reign. In chapter 2, verses 10 & 11 he concludes:

My heart took delight in all my labor, and this was the reward for all my toil. Yet when I surveyed all that my hands had done and what I had toiled to achieve, everything was meaningless, a chasing after the wind; nothing was gained under the sun.

Contentment and dissatisfaction

The second warning is to not look for easily quantifiable value in every task we do and every moment we spend. Solomon’s counsel is very down-to-earth. In Chapter 3 he suggests that God’s people will always live with a tension. God has put eternity in our hearts and so we are always hungry to know more than this life can ever offer. We want to enjoy an intimacy with God and with each other, and a satisfaction in our work that, in the here and now, we cannot fully achieve. To be sure, in God’s presence we will at last find such total fulfillment, but in this life we must accept the tension.

We will never be able to figure out exactly what God is up to or why he seems to choose such roundabout ways to accomplish his purposes. These are mysteries we must learn to live with.

And so is the tension between contentment and discontentment – particularly in our work, where the conflict between our ideals and reality seems most intense. But Solomon suggests (in chapter 3:14) that this is just how God intends it. This is what makes us dependent on him. This is why we have to rely on his grace. If it was easy we would start thinking that we’d accomplished it by

ourselves. It may be frustrating that all is so mysterious, but it's designed that way in order to push us back to reliance on God. And to remember his presence in the midst of the mundane.

Serving others

Thirdly, Ecclesiastes warns us that if we work only for ourselves, it will seem pointless in the end. We have been made for community, and to serve others. "*A cord of three strands is not quickly broken.*" (Eccl. 4:12)

In our present society, money and status are held up as important motivating factors, and a reason why students should apply themselves to the demands of study. But the writer of Ecclesiastes says it is better to settle for a handful of goods and live with contentment than be forever working our butts off for two handfuls; for we will discover – too late – that it just isn't worth it.

Jesus too, cautioned against rampant self-focused ambition. In Luke 12 he tells the parable of the rich fool – a wealthy landowner who, in a fit of greed and selfishness, decided to build bigger barns to house his bumper crop, so that he could enjoy the "good life" without ever having to work again. God, seeing his heart, labels him a fool and takes his life away.

Eugene Peterson translates Jesus's punch line (verse 21) as: "*That's what happens when you fill your barn with Self and not with God.*"¹¹

Of this parable, Craig Evans writes:

*"The man is implicitly selfish. He does not see this abundance as an opportunity to help those needing food. Rather, he hoards his plenty and then relaxes under the assumption that his troubles are over. Herein lies his folly. The day will come, often sooner than expected, when all persons will have to stand before God and give an account. All that the fool will have to show for his life will be bigger barns crammed with food, food that will be enjoyed by others now that he is dead. Rather than giving away his surplus, and so laying up treasure in heaven, he has selfishly and greedily hoarded his worldly goods with the result that in the end he does not even benefit from them."*¹²

There is real meaning and significance in work that serves others and God. This is what we were made for. Our culture's promotion of the self-centered good life is a dead-end and will bring no lasting satisfaction.

Conversely, when we seize the opportunities presented to us every day to serve others and build friendship through our work, genuine fulfillment can come. Each task. Each transaction. Every relationship. All these can become an expression of care and concern for someone. If you are in touch with God, every action can become a living reminder of his love and grace for others.

¹¹ E. Peterson, *The Message*, 151

¹² Craig Evans, *Luke* (NIBC) (Hendrickson: Peabody, Massachusetts, 1990),196

In summary

The book of Ecclesiastes certainly invites us to be honest about the frustrations and struggles we experience. But don't make the mistake of letting those frustrations grow out of proportion. Don't think that God is not with us *in* the struggles. For quite the opposite is true. *Because* God is in the struggle – *that's* why we feel the tension. At the very moment when we're tempted to run, God is calling us to stand. We need to be awake to see God at work in places where we have previously been blind to his presence.

Our daily work is part of our service for God. And our daily work (as we'll talk more about in Chapter 9) is part of our worship of God... for worship is not just something we do on Sunday. It is our gift, of ourselves and of our creativity, to our Father.

With penetrating skepticism Ecclesiastes probes the underside of life and exposes the futility of so much that the world encourages us to pursue. But the aim is not to leave us depressed and discouraged. Rather, it should help us live with a new liberty – released from the anxiety and fears so many have when they are preoccupied with the need to build bigger barns, or to make more money, or to push harder for promotion.

Thirdly, ecclesiastes warns us that if we work only for ourselves, it will seem pointless in the end. We have been made for community, and to serve others. “a cord of three strands is not quickly broken.” (eccl. 4:12)

UP CLOSE & PERSONAL

1. What kind of “legacy” are you hoping to leave with those who know you? Are you confident it will stand the test of time?
2. Personal meditation: Reflect on your dreams and ambitions? Are they self-focused or primarily other-directed? Short-term or long-term?

Exercise

Refer back to your list of tasks and roles at the end of the Introduction.

- What tasks/work do you find frustrating or meaningless? Why?
- What tasks/work do you find fulfilling and purposeful? Why?
- How is the work you're engaged in able to serve others?
- In what ways are you investing in other people?

Chapter 6 RESTING FROM WORK ... taking a break

What do you think of when you hear the word “rest”?

Do you dream of quiet days in a deck chair on a deserted beach? Or perhaps time with family and friends, completely free of the prospect of work?

What the Bible says about rest

There is much in the Scriptures about rest – almost as much as about work. This is not surprising when you consider that work and rest are two sides of the one coin. You can’t have one without the other. And their relationship to each other is modeled in Genesis, chapters 1 and 2 ... within the story of Creation.

By the seventh day God had finished the work he had been doing; so on the seventh day he rested from all his work. And God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it he rested from all the work of creating that he had done. (Gen. 2:2-3)

What exactly did God do when he rested?

He took a break. He refreshed himself. Was God exhausted so that he needed a rest? Or did he just want to stand back and enjoy what he had made? If we hope to appreciate the worth of something, we need to take time to enjoy and evaluate it, to catch a glimpse of the big picture and gain a new sense of perspective.

Sabbath

Early in the history of the people of Israel, a “sabbath” was established, based on the example of the Creation story. It was a sign of the covenant. The fourth commandment is one of only two that are given in a positive form – “Remember the sabbath, to keep it holy”. For the sabbath was intended by God to be a day of delight. An opportunity to celebrate life and anticipate the future. It was also a day to be set apart, consecrated and dedicated to God.

Like the other commandments, the sabbath was given in order to keep the people of Israel liberated. For the call to “lay down the tools” for one day a week was a discipline which was intended to break the relentless demands of work. In this sense, it was not so much a “commandment” as a kindness, an example of God’s care.

In the Gospels the sabbath plays a prominent role. Not surprising, since many of the run-ins that Jesus had with the religious authorities sprang out of sabbath-keeping. The legalism of the day had tied the sabbath into a highly negative command – with laws against all kinds of trivial activities. This was consistent with the “ethics of avoidance” predominant among the Jews at the time. Their effort to “avoid sin” missed the point of sabbath rest entirely. The response that Jesus made was to demonstrate mercy, healing, liberation and restoration. In doing so he made a dramatic point about the true meaning of the sabbath.

Sabbath then is, viewed biblically, a day of pause, a time of physical rest and renewal, an opportunity for spiritual refreshment. It is a gift from God.

Rest – not leisure

It's important to note the distinction between rest and leisure. Rest and sabbath are not the same as leisure, though they may certainly overlap. Rest is all about recovering our equilibrium – with God, with ourselves, with others and with creation. The goal of leisure is personal enjoyment – which may well be a by-product of rest, but not its primary purpose.

In fact, leisure can frequently divert us from rest. For many people it either becomes so dependent on frenetic activity that it is just another form of work (like the old “work hard, play hard” maxim) or so caught up in personal pleasure that there is little room to reconnect with God, our inner selves, and others.

A further complication is the place consumerism has come to play in our culture. We are constantly being asked to buy this or that gadget, or take this overseas holiday or that thrill-seeking adventure – as if filling our lives up with more and more pleasurable experiences will somehow lead to greater happiness.

Unquestionably a Christian needs to discover a place for leisure. However leisure is not the biblical opposite of work – rest is. For it's as we seek to be renewed and re-energized that we are able to re-enter the rhythm of work.

Rest is a dirty word

In spite of the clear biblical mandate to rest, life is increasingly so full that few people take the time to rest well. Alvin Toffler's prophetic words of the '70's have been confirmed with remarkable accuracy. Life is dramatically faster now than it was a generation or so ago. Little wonder that the reply I expect most when I ask friends how their week has been is, “I'm just so incredibly busy,” or “Flat stick!”

Why have we allowed the treadmill of life to speed up? Why do we have to live faster and faster, so that our lives seem to be spent just trying to keep pace? No doubt there are many factors, but three key ones Gordon MacDonald identifies in his short article “Rest Stops”¹³ are:

a. Rest is not “productive”

Efficiency and productivity are virtues in our society. And productivity means efficient activity. Our narrow definition of productivity excludes any concept of strengthened relationship, often with unfortunate results. For example, in an efficiency drive in orphanages, staff numbers were reduced. However, it was quickly discovered that when there were not enough staff to handle and hug the babies, the babies simply died.

We can even make ourselves feel guilty if we're not working or being “productive”. It's our “productivity” which generally feeds our sense of value and worth.

¹³ Gordon MacDonald “Rest Stops” in [Life@Work](#) Journal, Vol 2, No.4.

Obviously rest doesn't fit too well into this equation! It's not productive, it doesn't feed our self-worth, and therefore it's a distraction from what is seen as really important in life.

b. Consumerism

Our culture is fixated on standards of living. We even measure the economy by how much it has grown each year – through the lens of productivity and consumption. Unfortunately the church has largely bought into this. We are very much products of our society. In the incessant drive to possess more, we have laid a real trap for ourselves. For as Gordon MacDonald says, *“The more we want, the more revenue we must produce to get it. The more revenue we must produce, the longer and harder we have to work. So we build larger homes, buy more cars, take on added financial burdens and then find ourselves having to work harder to pay for it all. More work, less rest.”*¹⁴

In fact, under these conditions, rest becomes the enemy of work.

c. The role of technology

Technology is a wonderful thing. During the writing of this book several years ago, one of us travelled extensively overseas, yet we were able to continue the process of writing and developing the content via a laptop and email, passing the text backwards and forwards around the planet.

It has never been so easy. But the same benefits of technology are also responsible for very negative consequences. Smart phones, wi-fi, social media, supersonic travel, and the like, mean that life is now actually more hectic than ever before. Virtually everywhere on earth is easily accessible. And our wireless devices have conditioned us to desire continuous “connection”. As a result, our work and rest have become so intertwined that many people live most of their week in a confused milieu, unable to concentrate 100% on any one activity, constantly distracted by texts, emails, and Facebook. Not able to truly work. Not able to truly rest.

Far from liberating us, digital technology has enslaved us. It has become our master, we its servants.

The call to simplicity

Somewhere in the midst of all this madness, the gospel calls us to simplicity. Because of the intense pressure exerted to speed up life, to be more “productive”, to accumulate more, to experience this and that, to “connect” with everyone, we need to take deliberate action if we're to fight against the current.

Some practical forms of simplicity

All of us live in our own unique circumstances. What I face weekly may well be very different to the challenges you face. However, each of us can develop habits and routines that help us grow a work/rest rhythm in our lives. Here are some things we, the writers of this book, have consciously worked at.

¹⁴ Ibid.

a. Dropping our lifestyle expectations

We've noticed that an enormous amount of stress and effort is given to appeasing our appetite for an increased standard of living. Many of us can actually live on substantially less with very little pain. Buying a house in a cheaper area of town and then resisting the desire to "upgrade"; buying a second hand vehicle that has already depreciated substantially but still has good life in it; settling for mainly secondhand furniture; eating out only occasionally; keeping one's wardrobe to a minimum and wearing clothes till they are well-worn; choosing cheaper forms of entertainment and holidays – all these are some of the practices we have pursued over the years. And they have reduced the cost of living substantially.

During the years of greatest expense (teenage children!), simplifying our standard of living meant much less financial pressure on us than on many of our friends. We were content to live on a lower income and therefore have more time and energy to give to other matters – including rest.

b. Walking rather than driving

One of the great technological marvels of our age remains the motor vehicle. It enables many of us to live and work in very different communities, and to visit family and friends hundreds of miles away in a short period of time.

One of the downsides of my car, I discovered, was that it "upped" the frenetic pace of my life because I was able to get to more places, do more things, and see more people in a day. Plus, city traffic being what it is, my stress levels often increased while in the car.

One of the habits I have developed to counter this hectic pace, has been to walk where I can, or even take public transport. (That's a challenge for me. I happen to be an ex-car dealer!) Walking slows me down. It fills my lungs with air, my nose becomes sensitive to the smell of trees and flowers, I see things that I miss at 50km an hour, and I meet people I would normally drive straight past. It gives me time to think, to reflect, to pray and to relax. Unhurried, I build a rhythm into my daily life, which makes me better prepared to face the times of busyness.

c. Not becoming a slave to being "connected"

Modern inventions have changed the pace of life, and the ubiquitous telephone is one of the clearest examples. Whether landline or cellphone, its insistent ring has become one of the great compulsions of modern life – even more so with the advent of the smart phone.

I base most of my work from home. There are tremendous advantages to working from home. I don't have far to commute each day (the traffic is very light on our stairwell!), I keep overheads to a minimum, and there is great flexibility in my day for mixing family, friendship and community responsibilities with employment.

However, with all upsides there are downsides. One is the accessibility people have to me via the phone. They know that I can be reached all times of the day,

night and weekend. The interruption this can cause to family life, let alone rest and recreation, is potentially enormous.

I experienced a real breakthrough when I realized that I wasn't obliged to answer the phone every time it rang. I did not have to be at the beck and call of everyone.

When I am in need of some time for reflection, rest or writing, or when we have visitors, I will frequently just let the phone ring. Visitors sometimes get quite unnerved about this – their faces seem distraught as I continue listening or talking while the phone rings! Almost an, “aren't-you-going-to-get-that?” plea.

Since writing the initial edition of this book, there has been a monumental shift in digital technology – away from the fixed line telephones, televisions, and stereos, to mobile devices that can go wherever we go. Smartphones, MP3 players, tablets – these are now so dominant in our culture that for many people they act kind of like a prosthetic – an extension of who they are; something they simply can't imagine doing without.

Being wired (or connected) is now a 24/7 experience. Public and private spaces, work and recreation, have within a short space of time become thoroughly colonized by screens. Texting, social media, email, downloadable music, movies, video clips, and TV shows, online video games, avatar personas, Skype and Facetime – these are the things that fill our lives.

There are some benefits to all this new technology. However, such a constant connectivity has also come at great cost. It has blurred the lines between work, rest, and leisure. It has shortened our attention spans so that most of us are now distracted and have swallowed hook, line, and sinker, the lie that “multi-tasking” is more productive than focusing on a single task. Our relationships at work and at home have become significantly mediated through the media we use – fundamentally changing the very nature of relationships (and in fact, the way our brains function). This has resulted in the human need for face-to-face, undistracted, intimacy becoming harder to find.

And...our capacity to desire and find genuine solitude and silence, so we can think, pray, reflect, and be renewed by our relationships with God and ourselves, has been deeply diminished.

If we are to be freed from the tyranny of 24/7 connectivity, most of us will need to take very deliberate, intentional steps to restructure our lives. This will inevitably include carving out spaces and times where we disconnect from the digital world.

The biblical rhythms of life

Not only did God intend for us to experience the regular rhythms of the day (day and night) and week (six days working, one day sabbath), but there are other laws he laid down for the people of Israel. These include regular “religious festivals” (some lasting several days), the sabbatical year (every seventh year when the land was rested) and the year of Jubilee (the 50th year – after seven sets of seven years).

All were intended to structure into the normal schedule of work a balancing rhythm of rest. How we do this in our modern and largely urban context is a personal challenge we all must face. But rest we must – not only because our weary minds and bodies need a “breather”, but also because of the constant need to realign ourselves with our Creator and his creation.

UP CLOSE & PERSONAL

1. If you grew up in the church, describe what part the sabbath played in your early life – how was it expressed in your family and church context? Then think about how this has changed now – both in your understanding and practice of sabbath.
2. What are some of the changes in our society that now make rest and sabbath more difficult to keep than, say, thirty years ago?
3. Do you agree with the distinction made between rest and leisure? What forms of leisure do you think are also restful? What type of leisure works against sabbath?
4. Productivity, consumerism, and technology have been mentioned above as factors that have contributed to the speeding up of life. How have these affected your life? Are there other factors?
5. Spend some discussing the section on connectivity. Do you agree or disagree? Share your own experiences and reflections of its influence on your life. What kinds of practices might help you to be freed from the tyranny of 24/7 connectivity?
6. Have you ever had the opportunity for a sabbatical? Share your experiences, the lessons you learnt, or the things you would do differently next time. Discuss creative ways of making space for sabbaticals.

A gift from God – Wayne’s sabbath year

I’d had a difficult year. Despite my intense commitment to working with unchurched young people, I was feeling tired and drawn. Everything was an effort. And the challenges I was presented with just served to overwhelm me. At the end of the year I sat with the other leaders of the organization I served and discussed my predicament. Conversation was well meaning but didn’t really touch me, until one of the leaders – a middle-aged man – spoke about the need for sabbaticals. I had heard the term before – mainly used by my old university lecturers, but it was a totally foreign concept in the environment of our organization. As he talked, the penny dropped – not that this would be the golden answer to my woes, but the timing was right to experience a break.

Six months later my wife Jill and I, along with our eight-month-old daughter, found ourselves travelling into the deep south, to a small isolated community. It was the beginning of a four-month adventure that not only restored my sagging energy levels, but more importantly helped set the compass of our lives for the next “season”.

During those delightful few months we explored beautiful Fiordland, I worked ten hours a week for a small Baptist fellowship – preaching, leading, pastoring – we developed rich and deep friendships, and I studied (a correspondence paper from a North American college).

Being enveloped by a caring community and appreciated for what we could contribute to them, having freedom to be a family without the usual demands on our time, studying church history, regaining a sense of spontaneity and of awe – all these elements combined to refresh and renew me. They were some of the key ingredients that made those few months a watershed in my life.

Sabbaticals frequently result in directional changes. I have seen this time and time again with my friends. My one was just that for me. I came back convinced that my time in youth work was close to an end. I was still completely unaware of what lay ahead, but the direction of my compass was already changing. I discussed this feeling with my fellow-workers, and we agreed that I would serve another 15 months – long enough to pass the baton to others.

As it happened I ended up going overseas to study at the college I had previously done the correspondence paper from. A new organization was also in its infancy – and with my colleagues I was able to develop some fresh material and trial new ideas. It was an exciting time. The energy and confidence to explore and change was largely due to the invigoration of the sabbatical.

Sabbaticals can be for everyone

Often I hear from people, “Oh, it’s okay for you. You can take time out. But I can’t. My boss would never allow me to take an extended time and he certainly wouldn’t pay me for it! You’re lucky.”

Of course there’s truth in these sentiments. Many of us aren’t in the position where we can just take a break from our employment. And yet it may not be as impossible as at first appears.

For some there may be an opportunity to make use of long service leave. Others may be able to apply for leave without pay. Others again may be able to accumulate holidays. Perhaps alternative low-stress employment for a period. A friend of mine took a year off from youth work and drove buses. “The most enjoyable year of my life,” he tells me.

The critical thing is not so much the length of time – but the intention and purpose of the time.

Even if the ideal of a complete break is not physically possible, there is still the opportunity for opting out of an aspect of our work for a period of time, in order to rest and consider where we are headed. For example, this could involve taking a year-long sabbatical from church responsibilities or community activities. While this won't provide all the opportunities that a complete break from work does, if it's well structured it can certainly give space for plenty of rest, reflection and re-evaluation of priorities.

I realize that the idea of a sabbatical seems risky. It's not easy to abandon the security of our regular life and work commitments. Yet my experience, and that of several friends, is that it's a richly rewarding exercise. Forgoing it means that you'll miss out on a wonderfully refreshing opportunity.

There will often be a cost – lost wages or a lower income. One sabbatical I took resulted in my small business suffering, as I had no one to replace me. And there was some inevitable dislocation in the commitments and relationships I was involved in.

But at the end of the day, as with our God-inspired call to take time out each week, we know the cost is worth it – because it's an investment in our mental, physical, emotional and spiritual health, and a re-creation for the next phase of our work.

I'm not indispensable

My experience of a sabbatical has taught me one invaluable lesson. None of us, no matter what our gifts, positions of responsibility, or contribution to church and society, is indispensable. God is capable of achieving his purposes without us. I know this might come as a shock to some – but it's true!

We are valuable to God, not primarily because of what we can “do” for him, but because of who we are. Sure, he delights in using us, but none of us is indispensable.

This truth has the potential to set us free from our activism and our desperate longing to feel needed. It can cause us to allow our relationships with God, with others, and indeed with ourselves, to become genuinely renewed.

This, I'm convinced, is one of the great benefits of the weekly sabbath – and of sabbaticals.

Chapter 7
DUALISTIC WORK
... the spiritual/secular split

In the Christian world there's a perception that we could be doing more for God if only we could free ourselves from the distractions of "the world". The thinking goes something like this...

I have a simple faith. I distinguish between "*spiritual*" and "*secular*".

By *spiritual* I mean anything related to God, anything that's *holy*. This is really the most important sphere of life.

By *secular* I'm referring to the everyday things that have little or nothing to do with God. These are much less important and significant than the *spiritual*.

You can see this clearly in the area of work. "*Secular*" employment is work "out there in the world". Its main purpose is to allow you to earn some money so you can get on with real life, and of course it provides opportunities to *witness* to your non-Christian workmates. Mind you, some forms of *secular employment* do have what you could call a spiritual value – I'm thinking of the serving ones, like medicine and teaching.

But the ideal form of employment is unquestionably "*fulltime Christian work*". That's where you have the opportunity to devote all of your time and energy to *the Lord's work*, unencumbered by the demands of *secular employment*. It clearly rates as a much *more spiritual* occupation than a "*normal job*".

Becoming a *fulltime Christian worker* is my personal dream. This is because it's the *ultimate way of serving God*. In fact, I long for the day when I'm no longer distracted from real service for God by having to work for a secular firm. My real dream is to give all my time and energy to *ministry*.

What is *ministry*? Well, it's anything that deals with the *spiritual* task. Leading worship on Sunday mornings is *ministry*. So is teaching Sunday school, leading a home group, preaching, going on an outreach, praying for someone, or being a *missionary*.

To be "*in ministry*" is to be taken up with the *spiritual* task of *building God's kingdom*. Of course, once you have experienced being *in ministry*, it's difficult to return to *secular employment* with any degree of passion. Nothing is more significant than *doing ministry*. Which is why *fulltime Christian workers* are highly esteemed in the church – and rightly so. After all they have sacrificed much (particularly those on the *mission*

field), they're at the forefront of God's work in this world, and they're making a bigger difference for God than you can in *secular employment*.

Ultimately, secular work doesn't really count for much. Things of the world will all pass away. Sure I do my best at my daily job, but what we *do for the Lord* is what really counts. Our *secular employment* is simply a means to an end.

Is that right? Is certain work more "spiritual" in content? Should it be valued more highly? Many of us certainly live as though it is, but ... is it biblical?

Examining the spiritual/secular split biblically

What light can the Scriptures shed on the way we view various tasks and jobs?

Genesis

This strange habit we have of splitting life into spiritual and secular boxes just doesn't appear in the story of God's creation of work. In fact, as we've already noted, God begins by doing some very "earthy" work himself – creating the universe! God acts as designer, builder, gardener...

Then God takes the bold step of giving to us humans a role in this universe-work of his, by commissioning Adam and Eve to be stewards of his creation. Does that sound like a second-rate call? Did Adam really think, "Oh, no – I really wanted a more significant role, God. Not a farmer! I mean, isn't there some spiritual task I could do? A priest maybe...?"

The Creation account allows no room for a spiritual/secular split. In fact, the writer consistently states "*And it was (very) good,*" as if to emphasize that God's original intention for his creation was the ideal. Yes, it's tainted and corrupted now – but that is the result of the Fall.

Biblical characters at work

So what about the role of people in Scripture? What light can they shed on the spiritual/secular split?

For a start, many leading figures in the Bible story were not "professional religious" people. God spoke to them in and through their everyday working lives. Though they were "believers", most were not told to leave their employment in order to follow God's leading – people like Joseph, Daniel, Nehemiah and Esther, to name a few.

For example, Nehemiah is extolled as a prayerful person, a dynamic and effective leader, even a justice-maker. And he was. But it is rarely pointed out that these attributes belong to a man whose primary role was to manage a very difficult and demanding building project. His strengths were developed within the pressures of his construction deadlines.

The same was true with Joseph, Daniel, and Esther. They were high-level public servants in somewhat anti-Jewish environments. Consequently, they had to struggle through what it meant to serve as representatives of a religious minority, working in an environment that routinely involved worship of foreign gods. Their worldview was substantially different to that of their

work colleagues and of the surrounding culture (which is no doubt how many Christians feel today).

These examples (among many others) help us to see that the Bible gives little evidence of a secular/spiritual split. The Hebrew worldview was a much more integrated one than that of the Greeks. Involvement in the marketplace didn't disqualify people from undertaking significant tasks. Quite the opposite, in fact.

Jesus

What about Jesus? Did he consider certain types of work better than others? Perhaps he viewed his many years as a carpenter as just "fill-in" time, until he was ready to engage in "public ministry"?

Certainly that's the way many people seem to interpret the life of Jesus. But it hardly seems consistent with what we know of him. For God himself, in human form, to spend the majority of his adult years engaged in carpentry, speaks volumes for the value of such tasks. Even as a travelling "rabbi" Jesus hardly played by the rules of his culture. He made plain there was no work that was "beneath" him. Even the work of a servant.

For example, when no one seemed prepared to do the menial job of washing feet he willingly took it on himself. While it proved to be an ideal object lesson for the teacher to use, there seems little doubt that the way he used it, far from divorcing spiritual and secular, actually demonstrated to his disciples how even the most mundane and dirty of tasks can serve others and honor God.

Paul

Among New Testament writers, Paul has most to say about the role of work. As we'll see in the next chapter, in 1 Corinthians Paul teaches that we should work out our calling in the context we find ourselves in.

This is important for our current age where "fulltime Christian service" is seen as the ultimate way of serving God – more spiritual and satisfying than "secular work". Under this false value system, Christians will never find a strong sense of fulfillment and value in the tasks God has placed them in, because they will be forever dreaming of a "better" way to serve.

Paul makes the same point in others of his letters. For example, in Colossians 3:23-24 he writes:

"Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for human masters, since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving."

Tom Wright comments on these verses, *"The task may appear unimportant or trivial, but the person doing it is never that, and he or she has the opportunity to turn the job into an act of worship."*¹⁵

¹⁵ N.T. Wright *Colossians and Philemon* (Tyndale series) (IVP: Downers Grove, 1986), 149-50

What seems clear from Paul's teachings is that...

- *All work is of value and significance*, in spite of the status (or lack of it) given by the surrounding culture.
- *There is no hierarchy of tasks* in God's economy. As Eugene Peterson writes: "*Any work done faithfully and well is difficult. It is no harder for me to do my job than for any other person, and no less. There are no easy tasks in the Christian way; there are only tasks which can be done faithfully or erratically, with joy or resentment.*"¹⁶ Neither are there "spiritual" tasks and "secular" ones.
- *All of what we do needs to be connected with who we are in Christ*. This is reflected in Paul's view of his own work. He seemed not to regard his tentmaking trade as a means to an end, but something that had real value in itself. About this Paul Stevens comments "...*the New Testament treats work in the context of a larger framework: the call of God to live totally for him and his kingdom. Therefore Paul was not, strictly speaking, a bi-vocational missionary, but rather mono-vocational by integrating daily work with all aspects of his kingdom life.*"¹⁷ This is reinforced in Paul's teaching. For example, in Colossians 1:10 he writes, "*As you learn more and more how God works, you will learn how to do your work.*" (The Message)

Where has our dualism come from?

If the Bible gives us no reason to create a spiritual/secular distinction, where has the split come from?

In the following chapter on "calling" we'll look further at how the early Church became influenced by the surrounding Greek/Roman culture of its day. Despite the insistence of both Jesus and Paul that our faith infuses every part of our life, it took only a century or so before dualistic ideas were adopted. Spiritual and physical were thought of as separate entities.

Biblical texts such as Luke 10: 38-41 (where Jesus comments on Martha's criticism of Mary) came to be used to support a view that certain tasks were more spiritual than others. An ever-so-subtle twist in the message of this incident led to the "contemplative life" being seen as far better and more spiritual than the "active life".

This dualistic view was quickly reinforced by the development of a "clergy" class, and then the phenomenon of monasticism.

By the time Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire, the distinction between clergy and laity was clearly evident. With the insistence on celibacy for the clergy in the 11th century, the demarcation between priesthood and laity was complete. The clergy inevitably acquired an aura of spiritual power, status and privilege. Ordinary people were relegated to second-class status. The spiritual/secular chasm had opened wide.

Monasticism, somewhat unintentionally, reinforced this growing worldview. The movement to set up institutions dedicated to fostering the spiritual life arose in part because of the nominalism

¹⁶ Peterson, *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction*, 70

¹⁷ R. Paul Stevens, "Calling/Vocation" in *The Complete Book of Everyday Christianity* (IVP: Downers Grove, 1997), 97-102. Edited by Robert Banks and R. Paul Stevens.

of the church. In the Christianized Roman Empire, believers were no longer a minority. In that atmosphere, discipleship quickly became diluted. When everyone is a “Christian” in name, and faith is assumed, then faith loses its sharpness.

With the best of intentions, reformers tried to separate themselves from this nominal Christianity, and to strive for spiritual growth in communities that were distinct from the world around them. So the notion arose that those who wanted to direct their thoughts uninterrupted towards God must not be distracted by the activities of a profession, or by family concerns. (In fact, manual work was not totally despised in monasteries, but it was definitely secondary to “more important tasks”.)

Luther and Calvin

It wasn't until the Reformation that this dualism was effectively challenged. Martin Luther had been a monk, but as he studied the New Testament his theology was turned on its head. His growing convictions about justification by faith soon led him to embrace a belief in the priesthood of all believers. Monks and clergy, Luther realized, were no more valued in God's economy than anyone else. In fact, all believers have a “priestly calling” in whatever roles they undertake.

Though different on a number of counts from Luther, John Calvin also promoted the belief that all work is “spiritual” in character. He emphasized the transformational nature of work, and with it social action. Calvin challenged all believers “*to work, to perform, to develop, to progress, to change, to choose, to be active, and to overcome until the day of their death or the return of their Lord*”.¹⁸

Yet, in spite of the efforts of Luther and Calvin, the church has never really freed itself from the clergy/laity distinction. We can talk all we like about “the priesthood of all believers”, but in reality our churches are a long way from this ideal. Tasks *are* divided into spiritual and secular. Roles *are* distinguished according to so-called “spiritual value”.

The narrowing of salvation

Much of this has to do with a narrowing of our understanding of salvation. In the late nineteenth century, salvation came to be viewed in largely individualistic and spiritualized terms.

Dwight Moody, the famous North American evangelist was a good example of this tendency. He viewed his role as essentially to “save souls”. In fact he used to say, “*I look upon this world as a wrecked vessel. God has given me a lifeboat and said to me, ‘Moody, save all you can.’*”

If God's real concern is only to see souls saved then those who preach, run crusades, go overseas on missionary service, etc., become more important than others. For they are doing what is closest to God's heart, doing what will ultimately be the only important work eternally.

¹⁸ Paul Marshall, *Callings: Spirituality, Work and Duty in Sixteenth and Seventeenth Century England* (unpublished manuscript).

In this sort of theological worldview, everyone else can best find significance by either contributing financially to the “work of God”, by praying for “fulltime workers”, or by developing a “ministry” of their own.

“Secular work” is valued only inasmuch as it contributes to the “evangelization” of the world. Employment is useful primarily because it gives us an opportunity to “witness” to our non-Christian workmates, and to earn money in order either to do “ministry” or to support others in “ministry”. Acts of service and mercy are essentially viewed as a means to an end. By doing these things we hope to attract people to Christianity and so “save their souls”. Likewise, the value of friendship building with non-Christians is mainly so that we can earn the right to share the “gospel” with them.

The “full” gospel message

This contrasts sharply with a more holistic biblical mandate. As we’ve seen in the chapter on “Transforming Work”, God’s intention is to put right the whole cosmos. (See Colossians 1, Romans 8, Ephesians 1, among other passages). Remember, Eugene Peterson’s paraphrase of Colossians 1:20, which we looked at in chapter 3:

... all the broken and dislocated pieces of the universe – people and things, animals and atoms – get properly fixed and fit together in vibrant harmonies, all because of his death, his blood that poured down from the Cross.

God’s redeeming work involves the restoration of all four foundational relationships (with Him, with ourselves, with each other and with the rest of creation).

To be sure, our relationship with God is absolutely central to this restoration, but it does not – indeed, cannot – stand in isolation from the other relationships. One automatically affects the others.

Salvation involves *all* of these relationships.

We believe in the importance of evangelism. In fact, both of us (Wayne and Alistair) have devoted a lot of our lives to spreading the good news. However, we don’t believe in an evangelism that is disconnected from making disciples. Nor a relationship with God disconnected from all other relationships. True evangelism leads believers to live as the servants of God in the *whole* of life, including our daily work.

Closing the gap

If we are to see the true significance of all work we do, we simply must deal with the dualism that dominates our view of the Christian life. It’s not biblical – and so it is counterproductive to our aim of seeing God at work in this world of his.

It is only as we learn to work *with* God, learning to see that what we do is connected with what God is doing, that we will close the false gap between secular and spiritual.

A prayer of Richard Foster's echoes the desire to discover this kind of integration...

*The day has been breathless, Lord. I stop now for a few moments and I wonder:
Is the signature of the holy over the rush of the day? Or have I bolted ahead, anxiously
trying to solve problems that do not belong to me?*

Holy Spirit of God, please show me:

How to work relaxed

How to make each task an offering of faith

How to view interruptions as doors to service

How to see each person as my teacher in things eternal;

*In the name of him who always worked unhurried. Amen.*¹⁹

UP CLOSE & PERSONAL

1. Have you heard anyone talk in similar tones to the piece at the start of this chapter? How prevalent do you think this kind of thinking is in your church context?
2. Read Luke 10: 38-41. Discuss what you think Jesus is explicitly and implicitly saying about Mary and Martha's activities. Why do you think we have assumed that Jesus' commentary on the different tasks each one was attending to at the time, was an either/or, rather than a both/and? (i.e. His rebuke of Martha was a not comment about the value of her housework, but about affirming the validity of Mary's choice.)
3. Why do you think we have developed such a dualistic view of work? Try to identify ways in which it affects your own attitude to the various tasks you do in the week.

Exercise

Refer back to the list all the roles and tasks you fulfill during your week, that you compiled at the end of the Introduction. Reflect on each of the tasks, asking yourself:

- How do I feel about the *value* of this task?
- What in this role do I find fulfilling and significant? Why? What do I find mundane, boring, pointless and insignificant? Why?
- How much do I feel I am serving Christ when I do this work?
- What about the tasks and roles you feel negatively towards? Do you think this is primarily because they don't fit well your unique mix of giftings and temperament, or because you have not been able to connect what you do with what God is doing?
- Take time to consider what opportunities each of these tasks presents for expressing stewardship, service to others, creativity, witness, conservation/preservation, the building of community and relationships, justice, peace-making, healing, etc.

¹⁹ "A Prayer at Mid-day" in Richard Foster, *Prayers from the Heart* (HarperCollins: New York, 1994), 76

Suggestion for a group activity: Have members prepare the above questions beforehand (or in a time of personal reflection at the beginning of the group meeting). Then, either in pairs or in the whole group, invite members to share their discoveries about themselves.

Chapter 8 WORK AS CALLING ... an invitation to vocation

Because of our involvement with numerous Christian organizations and churches, we both have had occasion over the years to see their application forms – the detailed set of questions they hand to anyone who is considering joining their staff as a “fulltime Christian worker”. Filling in these documents is surely a marathon activity. As you labor with all sorts of probing questions, you begin to wonder, “Am I really good enough for this position?”

But no question is as difficult to pin down as the one that – in one form or another – asks: “What *call* do you feel to this work?”

The Christian call

The “call” has certainly become part of the language of evangelicals. We hear it used in a number of different ways. “I feel called to the ministry.” “My work is my calling.” “I sense the call of God on my life.” “God has called me to Africa.”

You don’t have to be in the church too long to realize that if you aspire to leadership you’d better be prepared to explain what direct communication you’ve had from God. In some more legalistic circles this may even involve a request for specific Bible verses, prophetic words, or incidents that “prove” God has spoken to you.

The older word “vocation” used to have the same meaning. It comes from the Latin *vocatio*, a calling. In modern use it usually refers to a person’s career or profession. For example, “I’m thinking of taking up law as a vocation.” However, it is still used sometimes (especially in Catholic circles) to mean God’s call to a particular Christian role.

Biblical perspectives on “calling”

The idea of vocation or calling is very much present in the Bible, but in a surprisingly different way. There it doesn’t so much concern *what we do*, but *who we belong to*. Biblical calling is not about tasks. First and foremost, it concerns our identity. Or, to put it another way, a calling is to join someone – not to do something or go somewhere.

Neither is it exclusive. It’s not limited to pastors and ministers, cross cultural missionaries and “fulltime Christian workers”.

Here’s the startling point. *All* of us are called.

And what is it that we’re called to? The Biblical answer is: to be followers of Jesus – his disciples. Any roles we play or tasks we do are simply out-workings of our call to follow him.

Called to belong, be, and do

First and foremost, we are called to belong. In the Scriptures the word “calling” carries a sense of intimacy. God calls each of us by name, and invites us to belong to Him. For example, God

states through his prophet Hosea in 11:1, “*When Israel was a child I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son.*” Here is a call to relationship with God, and with it, to be a part of His family.

Matthew writes about Jesus, “*Going on from there, he saw two other brothers, James son of Zebedee and his brother John...Jesus called them, and immediately they left the boat and their father and followed him.*” (Matt 4:21-22)

We are not called *out of* the world. We find our true identity as God’s people *in* the world that God made. This is expressed through living a life of transformation, and of service. For example:

You, my brothers, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature; rather, serve one another in love (Gal 5:13).

Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace (Col 3:15).

For God did not call us to be impure, but to live a holy life (1 Thess 4:7).

I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received (Eph 4:1).

But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God... that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness and into his wonderful light (1 Peter 2:9-10).

Os Guinness puts it this way: *Calling means that our lives are so lived as a summons of Christ that the expression of our personalities and the exercise of our spiritual gifts and natural talents are given direction and power precisely because they are not done for themselves, or for our families, or our businesses or even humankind, but for the Lord, who will hold us accountable for them.*²⁰

So ... our calling or “vocation” is to belong to God. The daily work we do is an expression of our calling, *but it is not itself that calling*. However “spiritual” it may appear, our daily activity is not (biblically speaking) our “vocation” or our calling. It is simply the way we work out that calling, the way we express our love of God, the way we put into practice our service for him.

Whether we clean floors or preach sermons is, in God’s eyes, not the issue. Whatever our work may be, his concern is how faithfully we live his way.

So how did we develop such a “warped” view of calling and vocation?

The seeds of a corrupted view of calling were sown, as we noted in the previous chapter, early on in the history of the Church. Despite the best attempts of both Jesus and the Apostle Paul, it took only a century or so before the Christian church became heavily influenced by the dualism of the surrounding Greco-Roman culture.

²⁰ O. Guinness, “The Recovery of Vocation for our Time” (unpublished audiotape).

Soon only priests, monks and nuns were considered to have a “religious” vocation. They were called to the “contemplative life” of prayer – set apart from the active life of ordinary, everyday work.

Even Augustine, who praised the work of farmers, merchants and tradespeople, distinguished between the “active life” and the “contemplative life”. At times it might be necessary to follow the active life but, according to Augustine, one should choose the other wherever possible.

This type of thinking encouraged both monasticism and professional church leadership. People were supposed to be “called” to these more “spiritual” roles. In other words “calling” or vocation became almost exclusively defined by the roles of the clergy and religious orders.

When Martin Luther began teaching that all Christians are called and that daily work is part of our calling, his ideas were revolutionary. Monasticism, Luther said, was not a unique class or special order. The work of monks and nuns was no higher in God’s eyes than the normal work, performed in sincere faith, of a farmer or housewife.

John Calvin further developed this idea of daily work as Christian calling. However, it wasn’t long before particular jobs (like farming and law) became specially identified as Christian vocations. Soon the concept that our calling is primarily about belonging to Jesus began to drift into the background.

Consequently, while “calling” was once too narrowly defined, it now became so closely identified with particular occupations that the words “vocation”, “calling” and “profession” simply became synonyms for “job”.²¹ This was eventually followed by the idea of “career”, resulting in a person’s identity and status being defined by his or her paid job, without any reference to God at all.

At the same time, in spite of Martin Luther’s efforts, the church has never really freed itself from the clergy/laity distinction. The two-tiered value system of the medieval church has largely remained in place. In church circles a “real” calling is still thought to be one that involves a person in pastoral leadership or cross-cultural mission work. And because of our emphasis on being called to “do”, invariably a calling is seen as something that takes us out of our current situation (geographical or task) as God “leads” us into a new one.

Working out our calling where we are

It’s exactly this type of mentality that Paul spoke about in his first letter to the Corinthians. Certain people within the church had been teaching that it was more spiritual for them to be single, with the implication that if a married person really wanted to grow spiritually then she should leave her partner.

²¹ While this emphasis began with the Puritans, it was mainly due to the influence of the Enlightenment and Industrial Revolution that “vocation” became identified with occupation or career, with no real spiritual connections. Hardly surprising then, that many people today speak of their vocation without any reference to a Christian calling. The wider culture has “wrestled” the word vocation off the Puritans and emptied it of its Christian meaning.

Paul took pains to dismiss this idea. In chapter 7 of 1 Corinthians he argues that we should not think that God's call on our lives requires us to change our circumstances (i.e. relationships, location, social position, employment, etc.). On the contrary, the norm should be that we remain where we are already placed and allow God to transform us, our relationships, our tasks, and our whole perspectives within that context.

Paul is perfectly clear on the subject, in 1 Cor 7:20: *"Each person should remain in the situation they were in when God called him."*

About this passage Gordon Fee says, *"The call to Christ has created such a change in one's essential relationship (with God) that one does not need to change in other relationships (with people). These latter are transformed and given new meaning by the former. Thus one is no better off in one condition than in the other."*²²

Paul was not advocating that we should never change our circumstances – simply that the call to follow Jesus means we can serve Christ *wherever we are*. Our context for serving may indeed change, but rather than *seeking* change in our situation, we should be working to discover ways that our calling (to follow Jesus) can be lived out through our current circumstances.

Conclusion

So, have you received a call? You certainly have, if you've set out to follow Jesus. For his call to you is a call to be in relationship with him and to be part of the family of God. Your vocation is to work with him in order to transform your whole life. As you do this you will increasingly find yourself able to serve him even further – by helping transform whatever part of the world you find yourself in.

UP CLOSE & PERSONAL

1. Share any experiences you've personally had with either having to justify or provide "evidence" for being called to a particular role. How did you go about?
1. How do you feel about the tasks that you are involved in at present? To what extent do you feel that your church community affirms and supports you in these tasks?
2. Have you ever considered changing jobs or location? On what basis do you think a person should consider changing jobs? What particular reasons that might cause Christians to change jobs do you consider would not be valid?
3. Discuss Gordon Fee's statement, *"The call to Christ has created such a change in one's essential relationship (with God) that one does not need to change in other relationships (with people). These latter are transformed and given new meaning by the former. Thus one is no better off in one condition than in the other."*

²² Gordon Fee *I Corinthians* (NICNT) (Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, 1987), 307

Exercise

Refer back to your list of roles/tasks at the end of the Introduction. Spend some time pondering how each one fits into your calling to follow and serve Jesus.

Then use the following outline to write a statement of calling for yourself.

Jesus Christ has called me (*name*) to belong to and follow him. This calling is presently expressed in being committed to (*church community*), and specifically to (*Christian family/friends/mission or other groups you belong to*), as well as serving in the following roles and tasks: (*List specific roles and tasks, such as husband/wife, father/mother, son/daughter, etc., friend; employee/employer/profession/paid employment, etc.; unpaid/voluntary roles; roles in church community; neighbor to, etc.*).

Feel free to personalize your statement. For example:

Jesus Christ has called me, John Smith, to belong to, know and follow him.

This calling is presently expressed outwardly through:

- Being a member of Harrisville Christian Fellowship

And particularly by being committed to:

- Jeremy Ronaldson
- Frank and Margaret Jones
- Mark McCutcheon
- Mary and Jerry Cruz

My calling is also expressed through the following roles, tasks and relationships:

- As a husband to Marilyn
- A father to Samuel and Whitney
- An engineer with the Harrisville City Council
- A board member of Redwood Park School Board of Trustees
- Coach of the Harrisville boys' Under 10 rugby team
- Friend to Bob, Jack, Tom F., Steve, Paul and Richard
- Neighbor to Kelvin and Sandra, Mrs. Grantham, Jenny and George
- Member of the church pastoral care team
- Helper at the Harrisville Refugee Centre

The listed roles are the main (but not the only) outward expressions of my calling to follow Jesus. As his co-worker, I will endeavor to use all opportunities to serve him and to build his kingdom. I also recognize that the roles, tasks and relationships I presently use to follow Jesus, may well change, as he directs and guides me.

Chapter 9
WORK AS WORSHIP
... serving our ultimate boss

As we've talked with numerous people over the years, it seems to us that, broadly speaking, there are three main ways Christians think about their work:

1. Work as a means to an end – “I work to live”

The most common attitude (particularly to paid work) is one that views it as a means to an end. We work *in order to* “live”. It sees the purpose of our work simply as being to provide for our needs.

This approach to what we do, betrays a very low view of work and it's often fed by the dualism we have talked about in previous chapters.

For many people, at least some of their work is viewed as somewhat futile or meaningless, often expressed in such statements as:

- “I can't wait for the weekend.”
- “When I earn enough cash, I'm out of here.”
- “Those damn lawns need mowing again! I'm always having to do stuff around the house.”
- “I do this job because it gives me the money to really live.”
- “I work at the bank but it's really just a means to an end – what I really love to do is serve God by being involved in the church band, or by doing street evangelism or whatever...”

A number of years ago, Alistair conducted an extensive survey of Christians and their attitude to work.²³ One of the questions he asked was “What is it that you struggle with most as a Christian in your work?”

The results were startling, even shocking. Many responded by noting not the challenging work environment or culture, nor that they were asked to do things that compromised their faith, but rather that they were deeply embarrassed and often annoyed by the behavior of other Christians in their place of employment.

The source of such difficulty was varied. For some it was the “super spiritual” and often insensitive utterances and behavior of excessively zealous believers, who often seemed to take their faith very seriously, but not their work.

For others it revolved around the “sub-Christian” behavior of some who publicly identified themselves as believers. Still others noted the poor ethics of certain “Christian” firms, who had a reputation within their industry for not paying bills on time, treating their employees poorly, and indulging in dubious competitive practices.

²³ See the Epilogue for the context of the survey.

Alistair was also surprised by the number of employers who said they were quite wary of hiring staff who were Christians. Many felt that Christians often expected to get preferential treatment and special exemptions from Christian bosses. This gave rise to tensions with other staff. And for others the wariness revolved around the past experiences of some “Christian” employees being poor workers – who did not seem to take seriously their responsibility to work hard and well for their bosses.

Now, why would so many Christians be perceived as behaving so poorly in their employment? The simple answer is that if you carry a low view of your work and its place in God’s economy, these kinds of behavior will all too likely be the result.

If our work is largely seen as a means to an end, we’ll miss the connections between what we’re doing and what God is about. Our work will be separated from our worship. It will be trivialized and underrated. We’ll fail to take seriously what it means to be faithful to both God and our employer (or employees). Such a low attitude of work ultimately leads to becoming “idle” in our work – at least insofar as realizing the potential of our work to serve both God and others.

2. Work as all-consuming – “I live to work”

A second and also very common attitude to work is one that is so caught up in it that life revolves completely around what we do. We end up “living to work”.

When our work becomes all-consuming we really have embraced too high a view of our own work. We make work an object of worship – it becomes an idol.

We do this by giving our work more importance than it’s due. We separate our work and achievements from what God is doing and wants to do – basically pretending that we can re-arrange the universe by our own efforts. It’s then that we become compulsive in our work.

Our culture, of course, has a word for this – workaholism. It’s easy to become addicted to our work. When this happens, our identity and value become so closely intertwined with our work that we can’t separate them. I become defined by what I do and achieve. This is very dangerous.

One of the ways society does this is by causing us to significantly define who we are by the work we do. Notice when you meet a new person, that the question they ask fairly early in the conversation is – “What do you do?”

Now at one level this is a fairly innocent question so we don’t want to make more out of it than we should. However, when we contrast the importance our culture places on finding out what work a person does, compared with that of many non-Western cultures, it does suggest a tendency toward our work and our identity being fused.

Alternatively, in traditional New Zealand Maori culture, one’s identity is based more around people and place – who you are related to and where do you come from? This is a consistent feature of most indigenous cultures. And when each of us spent time in the Philippines we were intrigued how infrequently the question of what we did came up in an introductory conversation.

People there wanted to know about our families. This indicated the relative value the Filipino culture also placed on family relationships rather than work.

It's important to note that allowing our work to become all-consuming is not the same as treating our work seriously. Neither does it mean that we shouldn't work hard. Nor that we shouldn't be passionate about our work. A biblical view of our work understands that our work has dignity and value. And God has worthwhile work for all of us to do.

At its best, work *should* be energizing and deeply fulfilling. However, there's a difference between loving our work and working hard at what we do, and being addicted to our work. For work is not meant to be the most important thing in our lives, nor should it be degraded. It shouldn't lead us to idolize it, but neither should it lead us to be idle!

3. Work as Worship – “I work as an expression of my worship of Christ”

This balance is best found when our work becomes *an act of worship* – just like it did for Brother Lawrence. He's the seventeenth century monk, most well known for his book, *The Practice of the Presence of God*. For fifteen years, Bro. Lawrence worked as a cook in the kitchen of his monastery and when his body was unable to continue in this role, he lived out the remainder of his life making sandals.

At first he was deeply frustrated with the apparent insignificance of his role. But Lawrence eventually came to develop a deep spirituality of the ordinary, viewing every menial task as an opportunity to perform “little acts of communion with God”. He developed practices that enabled him to experience God's presence and use every task and conversation as an opportunity for service and worship. Lawrence wrote that...

*The times of activity are not at all different from the hours of prayer ... for I possess God as peacefully in the commotion of my kitchen, where often enough several people are asking me for different things at the same time, as I do when kneeling before the Blessed Sacrament.*²⁴

His attitude was: “*We must never tire of doing little things for the love of God, who considers not the magnitude of the work, but the love.*”²⁵

Brother Lawrence understood a very important point: our work is supposed to be intimately connected with our worship. In fact, our work often seems meaningless because we fail to work at finding ways of connecting our work with that of God's work. But when undertaken in partnership with God and his work, our tasks find significance and they become an expression of our love for God.

24

Brother Lawrence, *The Practice of the Presence of God: With Spiritual Maxims* (Grand Rapids: Revell, 1999), 115.

25

Ibid, 98.

This means that we can worship God by working *with* Him when we're:

- changing the diapers,
- renovating a kitchen,
- repairing a car,
- looking after our grandchildren,
- studying for an exam,
- helping a customer find the right material,
- fixing a computer etc.

In Colossians 3:23-24, Paul puts it well when he states:

Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for human masters, since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. For it is the Lord Christ you are serving.

Whatever you do.

Work can – and should – be an act of worship.

You see, if worship only gets identified with what happens on Sunday, it is only a pale reflection of what God views as worship. For true worship is about the constant reorientation of our lives towards God and God's purposes for us. It's about the offering of all we are and all we do to God. In fact, the New Testament hardly ever uses the word worship to refer to what Christians do when they gather together.

Mostly, worship is used to talk about the way we are urged to offer the whole of our lives to God in his service. Think about, for example, Paul's words to the Romans:

"Therefore, offer yourselves as a living sacrifice..." This is a pivotal point in Paul's argument to the Romans. And he uses one of his favorite words – *Therefore*. It's there to alert the hearer/reader that what Paul has said and what he is about to say are thoroughly linked. He's tying it all together: "Taking everything I've said up to now into account, here's what I want you to do ... here is what it means for living and working."

We love the way Eugene Peterson captures this in his paraphrase of Romans 12:1-2:

So here's what I want you to do. God helping you: Take your everyday, ordinary life – your sleeping, eating, going-to-work, and walking-around life – and place it before God as an offering. Embracing what God does for you is the best thing you can do for him. Don't become so well-adjusted to your culture that you fit into it without even thinking. Instead, fix your attention on God. You'll be changed from the inside out.

This is an act of worship for the *home* and the *marketplace* – not just inside the church building. When Paul so deliberately located worship in the physical business of living and working he would have shocked some of his Greek hearers who tended to despise the material aspects of life, thinking that God (and spirituality) was only concerned with ethereal, airy-fairy matters.

Paul disagrees. “Don't become so well-adjusted to your culture”. In other translations “not conforming to *the present age*” is used. It's a phrase Paul uses to contrast with “the age to come”, where God's priorities and values rule.

Paul is urging us not to let the present age – our surrounding culture – dictate terms. Not to presume that how it expects us to think and be motivated, to work and relate, to live and behave, is necessarily how God wants it to be.

In a sense we're called to be counter-cultural. Which is not to say that absolutely everything will be different. But much will.

So rather than automatically accepting that we should work (among other activities) like everyone else in our culture, how about we ask ourselves some questions... We're aiming to follow Jesus, right? Could that mean we might work ... differently?

Differently? How? For Paul, it is a changing “from the inside out”. The Greek verb he uses is *metamorpho*. Notice the resemblance to our English word *metamorphosis* – the radical change of an animal from one form to another – like the caterpillar turning into the beautiful butterfly.

Paul is suggesting that this is what God wants to do in our lives and in our work. However, our metamorphosis doesn't just happen by autopilot. It requires careful and disciplined thought. That's why most English translations use the phrase, “by the renewing of your minds”. We need to apply ourselves to the business of thinking Christianly about our work. Otherwise, our surrounding culture will simply “squeeze us into its mold”.²⁶

As our whole thinking and belief systems are renewed, this works its way out in very tangible, visible changes regarding the way we live and work.

UP CLOSE & PERSONAL

1. Which tendency are you most vulnerable to? Is it worshipping work (workaholism) or treating it as a means to an end? Why?
2. In what ways do you think your faith community could better recognize and value *all* work, undertaken as an act of worship (not just certain tasks that seem more significant to God)?
3. Theologian Miroslav Volf says, “*With regard to our work, we pray not so much for God to miraculously bring about a desired result but to make us willing, capable and effective instruments in God's hand – which is what we were created to be in the first place.*” Discuss this statement, with regard to what kind of help we can expect God to provide us in our work.

26

J.B. Phillips' paraphrase of Romans 12:1.

4. Is there anything that would help me to remember that when I work this coming week I can do so as an act of worship – knowing that I am serving Jesus?

Chapter 10
WORK AS MISSION
... laboring for the kingdom

Alistair has been haunted for a number of years by a statement made by William Diehl, sales manager for Bethlehem Steel:

In the almost thirty years of my professional career, my church has never once suggested that there be any type of accounting of my on-the-job ministry to others. My church has never once offered to improve those skills which could make me a better minister, nor has it ever asked if I needed any kind of support in what I was doing. There has never been an inquiry into the types of ethical decisions I must face, or whether I seek to communicate my faith to my co-workers. I have never been in a congregation where there was any type of public affirmation of a ministry in my career. In short, I must conclude that my church really doesn't have the least interest in whether or how I minister in my daily work.²⁷

Does this sense of frustration and disappointment resonate with you? It certainly does with us. When we start to gain a vision for our work being a part of our calling and an expression of our worship, it's to be expected that we look to our faith community for support, encouragement, and resourcing, so we can serve God well in our work.

In fact, Diehl hints that he would dearly love to be related to in the same way his church relates to cross-cultural missionaries or pastors. His cry is to be recognized and supported as a marketplace missionary.

But we are aware that those two words don't quite seem to fit together, do they? Marketplace missionary? In fact, the phrase borders on the oxymoronic. For the idea that mission can take place in our places of paid or unpaid work, is not something that too many Christians would consider normal.

Put more bluntly, it doesn't quite seem right that we would commission an engineer or a sales rep as a missionary in his/her weekly employment.

Why Not?

Why is this the case? Partly, it's because mission has often been associated with the work that a select few believers called "missionaries" do in exotic and remote places. Closer to home, if we *do* recognize the missionary role of believers in our own community, it is generally limited to a few particular tasks such as evangelism and church planting and perhaps some social service ministries.

We don't dispute the need for evangelism in the marketplace. Without work expanding our circle of contact with non-Christians in a very natural way we might otherwise develop very few significant relationships with unbelievers. Although, even when it comes to evangelism, we think

²⁷ William E. Diehl, *Christianity and Real Life* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976), v-vi.

a lot of Christians live with far too much fear and self-consciousness about what is required. One of the best evangelists Alistair knows is a Christian who struggles with all sorts of questions about his faith (and the fact that we would think of him as an evangelist would horrify him!). But his colleagues love the questions he asks as a fellow searcher and the fact that he doesn't pretend to have it all together. His questions invite their participation without fear of being set upon. He has a gift for whetting people's appetite to know more. The best evangelists aren't pumped up. They are just themselves, admitting honestly how it is for them.

But is mission in the workplace only about evangelism? We don't believe so. You see, mission is really God's work of bringing about his kingdom in this world. It's the work of transformation we looked at in Chapter 5. Everything that contributes to this is important. God's kingdom impacts every area of human life and endeavor. This includes evangelism, which is the center or heart of mission. The missiologist David Bosch puts it in perspective when he writes, "*Evangelism is calling people to become followers of Jesus. It is enlisting people for mission – a mission as comprehensive as that of Jesus.*" So, mission is the wider concept, incorporating all that God intends to transform in this world.

We are all missionaries

A significant change has taken place in Christian understanding recently that recognizes mission as the task of the *whole* people of God – not just those who are traditionally labeled "missionaries". It sees that the *whole* church is called to live the *whole* gospel in the *whole* of life, in a way that will impact on the *whole* world.

Mission literally means, "sending". It refers to what God sends Christians into the world to be and to do. The "whole church" means that mission is a task for the data entry worker, mother, policy analyst, neighbor, lawyer, volunteer club member, and advertising exec. It's a task for *all* who follow Jesus.

The "whole gospel" means that mission involves much more than just getting people to follow Jesus – though that's certainly an important part of mission. It has to do with God's vision for us and for the world. A vision for all of creation to be whole again – complete and perfect. It's the bringing about of shalom. Complete harmony and wholeness. Between God and us. Between us and other people – particularly those who we struggle to get along with. Between us and the rest of God's creation. And also living at-one within ourselves. In other words, the whole gamut of transformation we have talked about in previous chapters.

It is the picture of the fulfillment of this dream that we meet in Revelation chapter 21 as heaven meets earth and shalom is realized in the establishment of a redeemed city, the New Jerusalem. So even now, *our* work is an act of eager anticipation. We live according to the values of a community that is still to come. When Jesus said, "*Do not be anxious about material concerns, but seek first the Kingdom*", he implied that our preoccupation is more important than our occupation. The way we go about our work is a reflection of what our hearts and minds are set on. It is a vision of the "Kingdom come" that directs and inspires our work.

We are invited to become part of the answer to the prayer that Jesus taught us to pray, "*Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven*". God invites us to personalize this

challenge in our work so that this prayer becomes, “Your will be done Lord, starting with me. And starting right now.” This may involve sharing our faith sometimes. It will definitely mean attempting to live with integrity. It will also involve creating and pursuing what is good and resisting what is bad; unself-conscious service; healing and restoring relationships; stewarding creation; working for justice and exercising mercy; helping people to become all God created them to be; developing loving, caring and unified communities. And much more.

The “whole of life” means that mission is a task encompassing and transforming our homes and our neighborhoods, our organizations and relationships, our environment, our politics and our everyday “*sleeping, eating, going-to-work, and walking-around life*” (Rom 12:1 *The Message*). And it definitely includes our places of work – the industries and professions we labor in much of the week.

The “whole world” means that mission is not just for those who labor over the oceans. It’s also very definitely for those of us who labor down the street, in the city, on the farm, in the classroom and in the kitchen.

The whole church living the whole gospel in the whole of life, impacting on the whole world. This is Mission.

God’s mission; Our commission

If this seems like too big a commission for us, it is. Which is why another profoundly important truth that needs recapturing is that mission doesn’t start with what *we* do in the world. Mission begins with what *God* is doing in the world and the part we have to play in God’s mission. To put it another way: it is not about what we do *for* God, but what we do *with* God. We are invited to do what we can, but in response to God’s initiative. For it is first and foremost, *God’s* mission. We are sent by God into our places of work, to be his agents.

This is why we like the word “commission”. If we break it down into two, we see that the “co” or “com” is a prefix for “with”, or “alongside”, or “together”. The word assumes that mission is done *with* someone. That someone is God (and in a lesser sense, with each other). Being “commissioned” involves working alongside God in God’s mission to the world. Another way of putting this is how Charles Ringma defines mission – *joining* God in God’s caring, sustaining, and transforming activity on earth.

Without this critical truth, we can easily try to do what only God can do – and that is impossible. For we’re on dangerous ground if we start with an exalted view of the significance of what we are doing and a diminished view of what God is doing. This makes our God out to be much too small – and us much too big.

One of the implications of viewing ourselves as getting involved in God’s already existing mission is that it assumes that God is already on the job in our places of work. We don’t turn up to our office, or classroom, or workshop, or retail shop, bringing God with us. God is already there – at work among our colleagues, customers, students, organizations, businesses and industries. Our starting point is to look for where God is already working to bring transformation, and then seek to co-mission with God.

Eugene Peterson reminds us that ... “as Christians do the jobs and tasks assigned to them in what the world calls work, we learn to pay attention to and practice what God is doing in love and justice, in helping and healing, in liberating and cheering...The Bible insists on a perspective in which our effort is at the edge and God’s work is at the center.”²⁸

The Challenge

We believe the future of the church will be determined by the extent to which it is able to get all its members mobilized and resourced and supported for mission all the time. What a tragedy that many Christians continue to think that what they do most of the time doesn’t matter to God. This is an outrageous lie and sadly it is obstructing them from pursuing God’s mission through their work.

However, emphasizing the importance of mission in the marketplace is not done by exalting the significance of the marketplace in itself, the way our consumerist culture does. Rather, it does so because whole-of-life discipleship must include the marketplace. Brian Walsh and Richard Middleton write that:

*The problem isn't that the Christian community is lacking in doctors, farmers, business people and musicians. The problem is that there are so few Christian doctors, farmers, business people and musicians. Most of us are Christians and something else; we do not engage in our daily tasks integrally as Christians ... Well-meaning Christians are merely adding faith to their vocation rather than letting faith transform their vocation.*²⁹

We think that’s spot on. If we have a truncated view of Christian mission that only becomes associated with what we do with our spare time, then our faith is really just an optional extra, leisure time pursuit, no longer integral to all that we do. Or it becomes only associated with those particular moments when we feel more directly involved in evangelism at work.

The truth is that getting involved in God’s mission in the marketplace is potentially thrilling, on-the-edge, challenging stuff. We love the way Steve Brinn expresses it:

*Why shouldn't Christians be up to their ears in tough stuff – and aren't most of our reasons for shying away from it shallow or false? From the time I entered business, more than 22 years ago, Christ to me has been a model of engagement. Dangerous engagement in life, where there was high exposure with questionable people and complicated issues, entailing prospects for great conflict and trouble. Christ's invitation to be like him led me, in the business context, from safe harbors to open water.*³⁰

Are you up to the challenge?

(In Chapter 12 you can read about how Wayne has sought to work this out.)

²⁸ Peterson, *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction*, 106-7

²⁹ In *The Transforming Vision*, (Grand Rapids: IVP, 1984).

³⁰ Quoted in R. Paul Stevens, *Doing God's Business* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 98.

UP CLOSE & PERSONAL

1. What has been your understanding of “mission”? Where/who have you gained this from?
2. Think about your own place/s of work. Try to identify where and how you have seen God already at work. What indications might you look for that God is working?
3. Discuss the implications for viewing yourself as a marketplace missionary.
4. What do you find most challenging or hard in sharing your faith in your work context/s? Why do you think that is?
5. Share your own perception of how your faith community/church understands your work. What would be most helpful to you in feeling that they support, encourage, and resource you?

If you're studying this book in a group, you may like to finish this session by praying the following prayer together:

Prayer of Commission

We are your people Lord, called to follow, serve and love you.

We acknowledge afresh our dependence on you.

We want to be co-workers in your mission to this world.

Empower us by your Spirit we ask.

Give us *vision* to see what you want us to do.

Give us *insight* to see what you are already doing.

Give us *humility* to serve without complaint, in whatever tasks are before us.

Give us *courage* to testify to your goodness and faithfulness.

Give us *patience* and *endurance* in the race you have set before us.

Give us *hope* to believe that ultimately you will reign in all places and all hearts.

Transform us, we ask.

May your kingdom come, here on earth, as it is in heaven. Amen.

Chapter 11 ENGAGED WORK ... devotion on the job

“Servants, do what you’re told by your earthly masters. And don’t just do the minimum that will get you by. Do your best. Work from the heart for your real Master, for God, confident that you’ll get paid in full when you come into your inheritance. Keep in mind always that the ultimate Master you’re serving is Christ. The sullen servant who does shoddy work will be held responsible. Being a follower of Jesus doesn’t cover up bad work.” Colossians 3:23-25 The Message

It was 10am Monday and Hugh was already feeling bored and unmotivated. A telltale sign was his mind already drifting to the events of the previous weekend.

It had been downhill pretty much from the start of the day. The boss had made his customary entrance, slapping a wad of edited papers on Hugh’s desk without so much as a nod. Hugh groaned. He knew from hard experience what that meant. The week before he’d done his best to draft the policy recommendation even though his motivation was about as low as the FTSE 100.

Of course, Hugh was by now hardened and cynical about the waste of time many of his efforts were. It was not uncommon for the boss to (seemingly out of the blue) change his mind and state that such-and-such a document or letter was no longer needed.

Survival in such an office environment was not easy. But over time Hugh had subconsciously developed a number of effective (though short-term) diversionary tactics to get his head out of the prospect of another mind-numbing day. Without a thought, he clicked onto the Net to check out the weekend’s sports results. Sweet relief! Man U had won away from home. All was well with the world!

Are you engaged?

One of the big issues in the workforce today is worker engagement. Numerous surveys have been conducted in recent years that demonstrate a low level of motivation, sense of ownership and commitment by a high number of people in their jobs.

Engagement has to do with being energized with our work. It leads to giving our all to the tasks at hand.

On the contrary, disengaged workers are those who are just going through the motions. They struggle to exhibit any strong sense of ownership and responsibility for their work. In fact, if bedrock honesty was tapped, the truth is such people would prefer to be somewhere else – they are only there because of a lack of other options.

So what determines the level of engagement in our work? Leadership writer Patrick Lencioni suggests that the three main reasons for disengagement are anonymity (feeling unappreciated and

invisible), irrelevance (as though our work doesn't really count or isn't valued), and immeasurement (inability to measure tangible results).³¹ When these are our dominant feelings, our work is likely to be a miserable experience.

Why Christians should be engaged workers

Let's face it: all of us have elements of our jobs and roles we don't particularly enjoy. This might be because of the reasons Lencioni advocates. But it could equally be because we're not well suited to the tasks, or owing to the fact that we don't get along with colleagues.

While there is no doubt all these factors make it extra challenging to be engaged in our work, as Christians we don't have to be bound and limited by them.

If we passively rely on our bosses and work environments to give us the feel-good factor, or if we spend much of our time wishing we had a better job, then we'll never take responsibility for our call to give 100%, to be truly engaged.

We are, after all, working for the ultimate boss. Nothing we do is ever wasted. God values and treats as worthwhile, *every* offering of work we produce – whether or not others around us appreciate or acknowledge our effort. What's more, it's not necessarily *what* we do but *how* we do it that most counts.

Let us share several examples of how challenging (yet critical) it is to work this out in our daily lives. We hope that these stories will be both encouraging and challenging.

The Prison volunteer

I (Wayne) am a volunteer with the Chaplaincy service at our local prison. I genuinely believe this is worthwhile work. However, the way we are treated as volunteers is often appalling. In spite of the written rhetoric, it is clear that we are not valued by the management. In fact, the cynic might observe that we're just an annoying irritant to them doing their job!

I am frequently mucked around – going to a lot of effort to arrange and turn up to see an inmate or lead a study – only to get there and discover it is no longer convenient or possible.

Sometimes I walk into a unit and am completely ignored by the staff. Other times I am in the middle of a deep conversation or a tender moment in a study or service and an officer walks in to announce that things have to stop – right now – without a moment's consideration of what is being interrupted.

My wife Jill and I were once barked at and ordered to immediately leave the prison grounds. No apology or acknowledgement of this wrong order has ever been given or received.

What do these semi-regular experiences communicate to me? That to all intents and purposes, my work doesn't matter.

³¹ See Patrick Lencioni's book, *The Three Signs of a Miserable Job* (Jossey-Bass, 2007).

Some time ago, my volunteer status ran out and needed to be renewed. The prison has a system in place to alert volunteers to this biennial occurrence – only their computer system failed to do so. So one day I discovered I could not enter the gates. The bible study and services I led, and the men I visited, were now left to their own devices. The trust relationships I had formed with guys were now put on hold. It took six weeks for me to have my status renewed – and it could have taken much longer if it wasn't for an advocate within the system.

According to Lencioni's three signs of a miserable job, going into the prison should be a miserable experience for me. I am completely anonymous to the management and most of the staff. It is clear that the system considers my contribution as largely irrelevant. And given the type of work I do, measuring whether I am making any real difference is inherently problematic.

In my worst moments I find myself angry, resentful and completely undervalued. And then...

I am reminded of *who* I am actually working for. And *who* I am serving.

It's as if God speaks to me: "Get over yourself, Wayne! Think about why are you really doing this. You don't need to be affirmed by the system. You know what you're doing is important to me. Treat each interaction, each visit, as an offering of worship."

In my best moments, I recognize that the men I spend time with deserve my very best. And on the days when I question the worth of my efforts, or am struck by how unsuited I am for some of what I do, I have to remind myself that none of this is an excuse for not giving my all.

Shoddy or careless work is not what God expects of me. And it cannot be excused because I might feel undervalued, anonymous or working in a job that doesn't fit me too well. The words of Brother Lawrence keep ringing in my ears! (Read them again in chapter 11 if you can't remember!)

Christ my employer

The second story was told to Alistair by a friend, about someone who made a deep impression on him. Here's what he said about the person concerned:

"He was one of the first Christians I had met who believed that he served Jesus Christ in the marketplace. He has done well in business and was part of middle management for his firm. Now his commitment was being tested. He felt enormous pressure because he had refused to do something immoral to keep a client. He also suspected that he would lose his job because he wouldn't go along to get along. He was right.

A few weeks later he was told that the company was making some organizational changes and his services were no longer needed. He knew, and his boss knew, that the real reason was not the given reason for the dismissal. He was out of work for weeks and when he found a new position it was for less pay.

Yet he had gone through the experience with an unflinching faith and I was impressed. I told him as much when we were having one of our regular breakfasts together. He

responded, “I serve Jesus Christ at my work. It’s nice to get a check every month, but really I see Christ as my employer. He honors those who honor him.”

Marketplace priest

The third example comes from someone who was the son of life-long missionaries. This man wrote:

“I have always felt the tension between the sacred and the secular. I felt this tension most when I was about to graduate from university with honors in finance and engineering, and I readied myself to enter the marketplace.

Here I was, a follower of Jesus, feeling conflicted about using a first-rate education in the business world. "What's redeeming about a job in the marketplace if the ultimate objective is only an increased stock price or a better profit margin?" I asked myself. "Would Jesus become a management consultant or investment banker?"

Over the years, I have come to realize that I was operating under a paradigm that segmented all earthly activities into two distinct categories—the sacred and the secular—and that these categories did not overlap. In this paradigm, working in the marketplace most certainly belonged to the latter category.

Some believers dissolve this tension between the sacred and the secular by simply becoming pastors or missionaries. I almost did just that. But there is another way to address this tension.

God gives each of us different gifts, passions and callings, and for some of us, these gifts are in the realm of business. If our calling is to advance God's kingdom through business, then that is our highest calling.

Whatever our calling from God—whether in the marketplace or in the church—our calling is noble and sacred, and the old paradigms fall away. In fact, the sacred and the secular overlap and coexist. Personally, I have found a greater integration of my work (the so-called "secular") and faith (the "sacred") with the realization that I can minister in the marketplace through my business. All aspects of my life, including my work in business, are ministry when they further God's purposes.

I have also come to realize that doing business can be a spiritual activity that has redeeming and sacred value, thereby resolving that age-old tension within Christianity. We need not feel conflicted when we seek to serve God through our work. The marketplace is as legitimate a venue as any other for serving others to the glory of God, and doing so makes our very work a sacred act.”

Other examples

British communicator Mark Greene tells the story of a woman who is a receptionist. She decided to make a habit of letting the phone ring an extra two times before she answered it, so that during those two rings she could stop and ask God to help her be more attentive both to the person and

also to God. Unsurprisingly it changed her way of relating to customers, and her sense of being attentive to God.

Several years ago Wayne visited York Minster, an ancient cathedral in England. The volunteer tour guide who showed him around was a retired gentleman who not only took great delight in explaining the history of the building, but also gently inquired about Wayne and what he was interested in. Early in the conversation he leaned over and asked softly, without a hint of judgment, “So tell me – are you a tourist – or a pilgrim?”

A girlfriend of Alistair’s, during his university days, used to write four capital letters at the top of each page of her notes – AMDG. Alistair was mystified, so eventually he asked her what they stood for. They represented the Latin words – Ad Majorem Dei Gloriam. Translated into English they read, “For the greater glory of God”. Here was a constant reminder of who this young woman was studying for.

UP CLOSE & PERSONAL

1. Read Colossians 3: 23-25 (listed at the beginning of this chapter). What kind of work would you consider “shoddy” in your employment?
2. Which of the stories/examples resonate with you most. Why?
3. Brainstorm together some practices that might help you to remind yourself who you are ultimately working for. Which one/s might you in your context?

Exercise

Think about your own work – paid or unpaid. On a scale of 1-10 what is your level of engagement? Then attempt to identify the factors contributing to this.

Chapter 12 CONFESSIONS OF A CAR DEALER ... putting it all together

Wayne's Story

Some years ago I became involved, somewhat unexpectedly, in the business of buying and selling cars. This chapter tells my story, and the struggle to express my call to follow Jesus as a car dealer. I hope that my honest reflections will help put some flesh and bones on the issues we have been grappling with.

Now let me say right from the start that I'm fully aware of the low esteem that my "profession" (perhaps this is an overly generous term) is held in. We seem to have done particularly poorly on the "most trusted professions" annual survey, competing with Congressmen for the "least trusted" tag, according to recent Gallup polls.

I've also learnt to live with the jokes – like the one that asks when you can tell that a car dealer is lying (answer: whenever he moves his lips!). Given all this, you might fairly ask, how can anyone professing to follow Christ sell cars for a living? In fact, many people might even consider the very phrase "Christian car dealer" to be somewhat oxymoronic.

Well, it certainly had its challenges. But I came to the conclusion very early on that it's exactly industries like car dealing that God most wants (and needs) to transform.

At any rate, I enjoyed and valued my time in business. While I no longer trade as a car dealer, I am very grateful for what I learnt and for the tremendous opportunities it gave me to work with God. It was a great ride (no pun intended).

How it all began

For much of my adult life I worked for Christian organizations. While financial insecurity was often a reality, my wife and I got by aided by the generous support of family and friends. However, after a few years things began to change. They say that necessity is the mother of invention, and when our organization was facing an uncertain future because of financial sustainability, we were really forced to look for small business opportunities. To be blunt, we realized that for the organization to survive we had to find some way of paying the bills.

Buying and selling cars was not something I naturally gravitated to. However, a series of events led to a colleague and I importing some second hand vehicles from Japan. That it would mean eventually becoming a licensed car dealer never even occurred to me. If it had, I would have felt the irony immediately, and backed off.

This is because my one and only experience with a car dealer was very negative. When I was young I spied in a local dealer's yard a freshly painted 1972 Holden (GM) Kingswood. Mid-blue in color, it looked the part. For the first and last time in my life, I purchased a vehicle from a car dealer. Things were fine for the first six weeks, and then it happened – the paint began to bubble in various places. Soon vibrant shades of rust brown appeared across the body, showing evidence that the panel shop job had been substandard.

There was little I could do about it, but it did reinforce my growing stereotype of used car dealers. Back then I resolved never to buy a vehicle from any of them again. In fact, that one and only experience of sales yard antics convinced me that used car salesmen were about as useful to the economy as the polar icecap.

The life of a car dealer

And yet, here I was, unexpectedly a member of this despised profession!

Dealing ethically with people in a highly unredeemed industry was one of a number of issues I was soon confronted with. Another was what value I should place on the 20-25 hours per week that I spent running the business. Initially, I confess, I viewed it as a means to an end. My heart was in Signpost Communications, but in order for us to survive we had to earn money.

But deep down I knew that it was inadequate to simply view the business as a place to earn a buck and a preaching opportunity. To be sure, mentally I ascribed to the view that God was interested in all work. But the reality was less clearcut. At first I didn't find it all that easy to make a connection between my efforts at "God's work" and my activities as a car dealer.

Part of my dilemma was that I viewed the car industry as one of the key markets fueling our consumerism. I knew that millions were wasted every year on our fetish of driving the latest and greatest fashion. So was it even appropriate that I, a Christian, committed to living an alternative to the great Western dream, should actually get involved in an industry that furthered our consumerist tendencies?

The position I came to on this was ... yes, despite the negative way cars were used and viewed, people still needed transport. While our wants may get awfully tied up with our genuine needs, providing people with good-quality, well-priced vehicles that they needed for getting themselves from place to place was still serving people. Some of my toughest dilemmas revolved around how to serve clients who were quite willing to waste thousands of dollars more on a care than they needed to, or who seemed completely unconcerned about the environmental impact of their gas-guzzling SUV! I had to learn not to force my own convictions on them, but rather to find gentle and subtle ways of bringing influence. Short of withdrawing completely from society, there was no way we could divorce ourselves from the systems and structures of our communities.

I came to the conclusion that all industries needed Christians, and it was our role to discover ways of redeeming and transforming those industries – of finding how we might work "Christianly" in them. Especially in industries like the selling of second hand vehicles, where the public desperately needed people they could trust.

The primary question I asked myself through those years of car dealing was, "How can I do business Christianly?" Or to put it in another (and perhaps less clumsy) way "How can I follow Jesus faithfully as a car dealer?"

It seemed to me that doing this would involve much more than being honest and acting with integrity, sharing one's faith, and giving generously to "Christian causes".³² It is not that these issues were unimportant or in any way peripheral. They were, however, insufficient in themselves.

In fact, I soon came to believe that my business should, over time, lead to a quite *distinctive* way of operating, one that was radically different to the norm.³³ These revolved around issues such as the way I bought and sold cars, how I priced them, the type of cars I sold, how I related to customers, service providers, and other car dealers. Many of the ethical issues I confronted had wider social, economic, and environmental considerations. There were tough issues and tensions to grapple with.

All this meant that trying to run a car business with real integrity and see it as genuinely contributing to God's work, became a fascinating journey of discovery.

Serving others

Selling cars is essentially a service industry. However, was it even possible to serve people altruistically and still make money from the business?

The answer, I discovered, was a qualified yes. When dealing with people I learnt to carry uppermost in my mind the question, "Am I genuinely wanting the best for this person, or do I simply see them as an opportunity to make a sale?"

I would love to be able to say categorically that my responses were always 100% for the good of the person, but that would be lying! However, I did grow in this area and certainly felt relaxed about serving people at the cost of losing a sale.

How did I serve people, then, through my business? For those wanting to buy a vehicle, I did so by...

- Helping them work out what they needed (this was often a long process, but absolutely critical if customers were to make a good choice).
- Giving them options to explore and suggesting they consider a car more suitable for their needs.
- Selling them a vehicle for a price that was hard to beat.
- Ensuring they knew they could come back to me if there's a problem.
- Being happy to provide ideas and options without making them feel that they were obliged to buy from me.

I learnt that some widely accepted practices actually worked against serving people well. For example, one was the kind of negotiation tactics generally employed by car yards. I call it the

³² Disturbingly, sociologist Robert Wuthnow discovered that for many people with religious faith, ethics in the workplace is essentially viewed as the need to be 'honest', and that even this word is thought of in quite narrow terms. As Wuthnow argues, with this truncated perspective "one's behaviour may contribute to the burning of rain forests and the perpetuation of world hunger and yet, as long as one tells the truth, ethics is not a problem." Robert Wuthnow, *God and Mammon in America* (New York: Free Press, 1994), 84.

³³ This is not to suggest that there won't be some points of commonality to the way other car dealerships were run.

bargaining game. The problem with making a sale this way was that it generally undermined trust in the relationship and played with people's heads. Plus, it tended to favor those who knew the game and were able to play it well. It was both counter-productive and unfair. For these reasons, I abandoned the practice very early in my business, replacing it with a set price structure.

Another industry practice was the strong encouragement for customers to finance their vehicle. I quickly discovered that there was a huge financial incentive for dealers to do this, as the commissions and kickbacks from the finance companies were a significant money earner for them. The result was that many people ended up buying vehicles they could not really afford, leaving them to struggle with high interest loans on a fast-depreciating asset. My contrasting approach was to do no finance deals and strongly encourage people to buy within their means. If a customer felt they *had* to get finance, my advice was to go their bank. If they were not prepared to lend you the money, then you definitely couldn't afford it!

In order to serve people well, I sometimes gave advice that worked against making a sale. For example, I regularly told people to hold onto a good vehicle for a length of time, in order to get the value out of it. Regular changing of vehicles almost invariably makes bad economics, because it will cost you each time you change.

I knew this advice was potentially bad for my business and there were some customers who chose not to change cars because of the advice I gave them! But I had to remind myself – did I want to *serve* people or take advantage of them?

I also attempted to serve my business associates – the mechanics, custom agents, car groomers, and panel shops whose services I used? How did I do this? By:

- Working hard to make my interactions and dealings with them an enjoyable and fun experience, as well as taking a genuine interest in them.
- Looking for ways we could make doing business with each other win/win situations, and recommending them to others.
- Being open, transparent, and honest in my dealings – striving for integrity.
- Finding ways to help them out; for example, by offering to pay my account early where cash flow was difficult for a service provider, or by offering a vehicle where they needed transport for an emergency, etc.
- Not expecting more of them than what was reasonable.
- Appreciating their work – and letting them *know* that I appreciated it.

Building relationships

Being in business was a great way to grow relationships – not just with clients, but also within the industry. I enjoyed immensely working with people who were part of the car scene. This resulted in opportunities to build friendships with my service providers – and with other dealers. It was remarkable how often someone would open up to me about their struggles, or ask me about faith issues. I put this down to taking time to be genuinely interested in them – creating the environment for trust to grow.

I also built a strong relationship with my Japanese agent that was tremendously enriching. In fact, we became friends first, business associates second. My occasional trips to Japan were wonderful opportunities to spend time with this man, his workers, and his family. We had intriguing conversations in the car on the way to the auctions and while sitting in restaurants, listening to what was important to each other. At times he questioned me about my Christian beliefs, and why I lived the way I did. This enriching friendship would not have been possible without the business. It provided the context for the relationship.

Developing gifts

Being in business also resulted in a great deal of personal development. It forced me into situations where the reservoir of my potential was tapped in unexpected ways. My car sales work prompted responses from me that other roles in my life have never called for. You see, latent within each of us are countless gifts and abilities that God delights in developing. His creativeness knows no limit.

For example, my business provided many opportunities to think laterally and come up with imaginative solutions. I never felt these were natural strengths of mine, but through the demands of my business God often helped me solve problems creatively. Someone might ring up in a panic because his vehicle had given up the ghost, prompting me to find a way to fill his immediate need so he could get by until a longterm solution was found. Or it might be through offering a customer another way of thinking about her requirements. The possibilities were endless and I learnt to delight in little bits of inspiration that dropped into my head just at the right time. I view these as “acts of grace” which helped me to see the way I could work in partnership with God.

Of course, many of these growing skills are transferrable, so as God has developed me in the business I have been able to exercise those same abilities in other roles I now fulfill.

One outlet I found for expressing my values as well as my gifts, was writing regular newsletters to all my past clients. I was able to provide information on the market, and on some relevant issue such as the true costs of running a vehicle, depreciation, financing, how to get the best value from your car, and so on. People appreciated this service and many commented on how it gave them food for thought.

More than a car dealer!

I am very grateful for the years of car dealing. And I certainly have no doubt that this work counted – it had real value in God’s economy.

However, the car business was at the time only one of many roles I carried during the course of my week. I continued to work part time for Signpost Communications. In addition, there are the numerous unpaid tasks that I do. They included being:

- A husband to my wife, Jill
- A father to our daughters – Maria, Kellie and Melody – and occasional foster children
- Chairperson of the local school Board of Trustees
- Neighbor
- Home group member

- Youth group leader
- Friend
- Church member
- Home owner

Collectively I viewed all these roles as the current expression of my call (or vocation) to follow Jesus. And I considered them all part of my work.

Of course, since those days, many of my roles have changed. Nevertheless, It has taken a few years but I now find myself thinking much more holistically about my day and week. All facets of my work mesh together as part of my vocation of following Jesus.

It has taken a while, but the paid/unpaid distinction now means little to me. Where the money comes from to live on is somewhat secondary to the value of the various tasks I feel called to fulfil. It's not that money is unimportant (we all have to live). Rather, it's that the value of work is never determined simply by whether I get paid for it – or how much I get paid.

Nor does the enjoyment I find in the task dictate whether or not I see it as “work”. I've come to accept that in every task there will be elements I enjoy greatly and others that I find difficult, monotonous, and uninspiring. If I did only the things I really enjoy there would be a lot left undone! Learning over the years about my motivations, gifts and temperament has helped me make strategic choices about where to put my time and energy. But ultimately I've learned the importance of putting at least some effort into tasks in which I'm *not* naturally gifted or motivated. God has much to teach me and each activity has its place in the scheme of things. Each contributes to my service.

This has forced me to think long and hard about how even the most mundane tasks are connected to God's work in this world. Because I like order, I rarely lack the motivation to wash the dishes and mow the lawns. But it has taken time for me to understand how doing such work can serve others, express care for creation, and be an opportunity for me to learn discipline. Recognizing this has helped me to take delight in doing these simple, menial chores well.

An integrated view

I'm fortunate. The nature of my paid work over the years, has given me a certain amount of freedom, allowing me to be flexible in the way I use my time. Not everyone is blessed with such flexibility. However, I think all of us can learn to be more integrated in the way we view time and our various roles. We can do this primarily by rejecting the paid/unpaid distinction as the main grid through which we value different tasks. Instead we can learn to recognize how much the task allows us to reflect and further the kingdom of God.

For example, the raising of children is a strategic task. At no other stage of life have I had the opportunity to shape and mold lives more than in those child-rearing years. I look back on them as the most important challenge of my discipleship. When I first began to appreciate the strategic role of parenting “work”, my view of it changed dramatically.

Don't get me wrong, I still find some roles (and parenting was one of them) more difficult than others. Because of my temperament and gifting, I easily gravitate to those tasks that have a tangible and clear outcome. My utilitarian streak is still likely to complain at the taking of "valuable" time to do something whose benefits are not immediately obvious. "It's not productive enough. I should be spending my time on things that produce *real* results!" But I have learnt to allow my value system to be reshaped and to view all effort directed toward God, as work.

This includes relationships. In fact, it *especially* includes relationships. For people are at the center of our calling to follow Jesus. People are the heart and soul of all work. Relationships do not (contrary to popular opinion) just happen. They are generally the result of working at it in a focused way.

So I am learning to be more flexible with my schedule, and to hold my activistic goals a little more lightly. Frequently, God will bring across my path people who need my time. These are unique opportunities to serve, encourage, laugh with, cry with, and open up to others. My journey of faith requires me to give priority and attention to the small things that God is doing in the lives of the people I meet. Listening to their heartbeat, responding in friendship and love, will not come if I am always focused on the "tasks" I have set myself.

This process of realigning my priorities is still going on!

UP CLOSE & PERSONAL

1. If a used car salesman thinks he can work with God, anyone can! What comes out of Wayne's story that you can identify with? What other observations and solutions can you add?
2. Try engaging in the same exercise yourself. Put down on paper ways in which you have come to see your work as connecting with God's work. Now try to describe this to the group, and invite them to quiz you further. Then offer to do the same for them.
3. What do you see as the greatest benefits that might come from realigning time to make relationships the priority? What are possible snags?

Chapter 13

WORKING WORDS

... changing our terminology

We all know how important words are. They communicate more than just actions and ideas. Many words encapsulate and reinforce worldviews – ways of thinking.

For this reason we believe we simply must change our vocabulary when it comes to the issues this book raises. We are not talking just semantics. For the way words such as “work”, “secular”, “calling” and “ministry” are used has so warped and twisted the original intention, that every time we use them they are immediately heard, understood, and interpreted through the grid of the powerful worldview we have been seeking to challenge. Unless we change our vocabulary, we risk tripping up ourselves (and others). Every time we use those words and expressions, we’ll find ourselves reinforcing the old ways of thinking.

Let’s consider some specific words.

Work

We looked at this in the Introduction. Because the word “work” has such a wide range of connotations, how can we make clear what we mean?

Simply by using a more specific word. It’s with paid work that most of the problems arise. So if that’s what we’re referring to, then “job” or “paid work” or “employment” (or even the older word “occupation”) are options to consider using.

If it’s voluntary work or tasks around the home, then the words “tasks” and “roles” become helpful. For example, “I’ve been working in my role as a school trustee.” Or, “I’ve got a number of tasks to do around the house on Saturday. I think I’ll be working all day at them.”

Fulltime Christian service

What do we mean when we say “fulltime Christian service”? Generally we’re indicating that the person invests most of his or her week in a role within a Christian organization or church. All of us are fulltime in Christian service, so to make the differentiation it’s much better to say “church work”, “paid church staff”, “employed by a Christian (or mission) organization”, “cross-cultural missionary”, etc.

Secular

Here’s one word we think we should make every effort to ban from our vocabulary – unless we are referring to it in the negative sense (such as secularization). The images it conjures up almost entirely support a dualistic view of life. Remember, nothing in life is removed from God’s sphere – only what we deliberately divorce. The process of secularization is a very real trend – but it’s not one that should include us. For in reality, all of life is meant to be connected with God and his work.

Consequently, when we use the word “secular” we are making an unbiblical and unhelpful distinction. Of course it can be helpful to talk about our involvement in different spheres of life. But the words we use to describe them need to be chosen more carefully.

Four helpful terms to distinguish these spheres are – Marketplace, Community, Church, and Family. God is involved in all these arenas. When we exclude him we are contributing to secularization. Sadly Christians have virtually given in to this process in the marketplace and the community.

We’re not suggesting that the boundaries between these spheres of involvement are distinct. They’re quite loose and overlap at many points. Most of us work in all four of them – but to varying degrees. Some of us invest most of our effort in the marketplace – the worlds of business, law, education, and industry. Others are able to give a majority of their energy and time in the family, community, or in the church.

Consequently, rather than “the workplace” being interpreted as “the place of paid employment” or being limited to the marketplace, really should refer to all of these spheres.

Ministry

Few words are more problematic than ministry. This is not because it’s a bad word in itself, but mainly because of the way it is unwittingly used to support a secular/spiritual split. It often has the effect of elevating certain types of service above others – making them appear more “spiritual” or important.

“My ministry is encouraging people”; “I’m in the ministry;” “We held a time of ministry at the end of the service”; “ABC Ministries seeks to...”; “Let me minister to you.”

The words ministry and minister are used in countless different ways, usually to in some sense highlight the “spiritual” nature of the task or role. But what does the word really mean? Paul Stevens comments:

The word ministry is derived in both Greek and Hebrew from a word that simply means “service”. A Christian servant is someone who puts himself or herself at God’s disposal for the benefit of others and for the stewardship of God’s world. Christian service – commonly called ministry – accords with God’s purposes for people and the world and has the touch of God, often unknown to the servant. Christian service makes no distinction between the sacred and the secular. Washing dishes, designing a computer program, preaching a sermon and healing the sick are all one....³⁴

Our suggestion here is that, given the way this word is so badly abused, we may do better to replace “ministry” with “Christian service” or just “service”. Not only will this help to work against our dualism, but it will also have the effect of putting all service (given to God) on an even footing.

³⁴ Paul Stevens, “Ministry” in *The Complete Book of Everyday Christianity*, 635.

Calling and Vocation

Calling is one word that is worth “redeeming”, if only because there is no easy alternative to replace it with. Vocation would have been the obvious candidate, but over the last few centuries it has been thoroughly “secularized” and watered down to mean something far less than originally intended.

However, we suggest that you aim to use the word “calling” with some discrimination. Be careful and selective in its use. The chapter on “Calling” helps to fill out the biblical meaning of the term. Used in the right sense and context it can be a powerful word, connecting who we are and what we do with our source and leader, Jesus.

“What do you do?”

Perhaps the most defining question in our culture is the introductory question, “What do you do?” It says a lot in itself. Notice it doesn’t say, “Who are you?” or “What’s important to you?”

Of course we must be careful not to read too much into this culturally-polite small talk. In itself it’s a good way of inviting people to share about themselves. However, as we’ve seen, the problem is what it implies – the suggestion that who we are and what we’re worth as people is so much wrapped up in our occupation. As if my paid employment could define my identity as a person! (Worse, what it says about people who aren’t paid for the work they do is depressing. Does this make them less than full persons?)

Incidentally, it’s worth pointing out that our own culture’s introductory question is not always as innocent as it may appear. Often it contributes to the status and prestige games our society encourages us to play. Tony Campolo tells of how his wife Peggy grew tired of the points-scoring at dinner and cocktail parties, and the way it made her feel so worthless. For example, she would ask a young woman what she did for a job and the woman would reply something like, “I’m a lawyer with Bond, Gibbon and Priest, specializing in commercial law and public policy. And what do you do?” Flattened, Peggy would usually offer apologetically, “Oh, I’m just a housewife.”

Determined not to be intimidated in future, she worked out a patter. The next dinner party, when asked what she did, Peggy replied seriously, “I’m involved in the socialization of two homo sapiens, into the dominant values of the Judeo-Christian tradition so that they might be transformers of the social order into the kind of eschatological utopia God willed for us before the foundation of the world.” – or words to that effect.

The incident is a salutary insight into the power of grand phrases, for when as an apparent afterthought Peggy asked, “And what do you do?” ... her unnerved acquaintance could only manage, “Oh, I’m just a lawyer”!

Perhaps those of us with less definable working weeks or with low status occupations could design a reply patter like Peggy’s! But just as important is thinking about what we can do to disengage some of the “power” that goes with this small question. What about using some alternatives such as, “What does your week consist of?” or “Tell me a little about yourself.”

A caution

In offering the suggestions in this chapter, we are conscious that we are only too much at risk of stepping into another trap that has beset Christians over the centuries – the trap of laying down yet another set of rules. Nothing could be worse than creating a group of buzzwords that mark out our so-called spiritual maturity.

So let us emphasize that these are *just* suggestions. Ways to break the pattern of thinking that has bedeviled the church from its earliest days. For words *do* matter. They often give subtle messages about how we value people. They frequently indicate how we think about what others spend their lives doing.

So, without setting up a new legalism, let's take a little trouble to use words carefully and help them carry the meaning we intend.

UP CLOSE & PERSONAL

1. Can you think of other words or phrases that are problematic in working against a biblical view of work? Suggest some good alternatives.
2. Within the life of your own faith community, what are some of the assumptions that deserve to be challenged? Are there words and terminology that should be made more transparent or honest or unambiguous?

Exercise

Refer back to the list of roles and tasks you made at the end of Chapter 1. Try to group them into the four spheres of involvement (marketplace, family, community and church).

- Which sphere dominates your time and energy? (Remember, these spheres overlap somewhat.)

Chapter 14
REAL WORK FOR REAL PEOPLE
... the ongoing journey

Remember our characters from the beginning of the book? In writing about them we have altered names and some of the details, but in each case they're modeled on one or more real people that we have had personal contact with.

What kind of issues do you think have been raised for these folk and how are they doing on the journey of connecting their work with God's work?

Roger

Perspectives that have been helpful

Roger, with his academically trained mind, had no difficulty understanding the theological meaning of the word vocation. He easily coped with the idea that he was not called to be a lawyer, but to follow Christ ... and that one outworking of that call was serving Jesus through his profession.

From there it wasn't a big step either for Roger to see that his role as a parent was not just an add-on. In fact, this insight was a freeing one to him. He had nursed guilty feelings about his "absent father" workaholicism. Theologically and theoretically, he jumped at the chance to value parenthood – to see it as central to his efforts at this stage of his life, a wonderful opportunity for discipleship.

Habits that are changing

Roger has even managed to translate a little of this into action. He sets himself the task of getting home regularly for the evening meal (though he fails as much as he succeeds in this goal!), and he has deliberately scheduled into his diary a slot on Saturdays for accompanying his children to their sport. Again, it doesn't always work out, but he has made some effort.

Unresolved issues

However, Roger still has a long way to go. The problem is his drivenness. Secretly he genuinely believes he is indispensable. He doesn't yet have a big enough view of God's sovereignty. He still has to learn that this is God's work and that he is a junior partner.

Unanswered questions

Until he recognizes his egocentric thinking, he will still struggle with the questions that bother him, and that he frequently expresses to his wife Colleen. Like...

- How do I keep all the balls in the air? I feel like it's a perpetual juggling act.
- How can I put some limits on the time and energy I need to give to my paid employment?
- Where can I get the energy to spend time with the kids at night? By the time I get home I just want to crash in front of the screen.
- How can I decently get out of some of the church jobs I've accumulated?
- How do I learn to say no?

More important question he still has to grapple with are: How do I learn to rest biblically? How do I recognize that God's work is best served if I see that my role is more in relating with people (including my children), and less in the tasks I undertake?

Possible directions for Roger to pursue

Roger could profitably undertake some sessions with a counselor who could help him identify and deal with his compulsion for seeking affirmation and approval. This will certainly have its roots in a childhood need to perform for one or more of the adults in his life. When he recognizes this problem he can then devise strategies for dealing with it, and will finally discover the freedom to say no.

Karen

Habits that are changing

Karen has worked through the issues in this book with a small study group to which she and her husband Steve belong. Encouraged by the others in the group, she is determined to tackle head-on the people who leave her feeling put down because of her fulltime role as a mother. She has borrowed Peggy Campolo's idea, and has worked out several replies to the "What do you do?" question.

Perspectives that have been helpful

The idea of partnering God has begun to radically alter the way Karen thinks about her daily tasks. She feels motivated to take even more seriously the challenge of raising her sons, relating to her unchurched friends, and helping out at school. Karen has also been inspired to see that if God himself has taken on mundane, maintenance tasks, then even the dirty washing and the constant cleaning up after the family is of value.

Unresolved issues

Karen faces the problem of many fulltime mothers. She often feels isolated and trapped in an unstimulating environment. She yearns for the intellectual and social growth that her husband Steve enjoys as a teacher.

Unanswered questions

What happens when my children grow up? What can I do long-term in God's service? Should I think about training myself for a future career? I enjoy the children and helping people through my church contacts, but does that sort of practical assistance help me for the next stage of my life? Am I allowing myself to be sidelined?

Possible directions for Karen to pursue

Karen might usefully engage in part-time training to enhance her people-caring skills. This training might be in health areas (like nursing), or educational or practical, depending on where her interests take her. She might, for example, consider equipping herself to eventually become a teacher, or a counselor, or an aid worker, or a staff member in a service organization, or an advocate for disadvantaged people...

Joseph

Perspectives that have been helpful

Joseph has caught on to the idea that work is much bigger and broader than “paid employment”, but unfortunately that’s as far as he has travelled. This inadequate understanding has just reinforced for him that his “job at the bank” should be treated as a means to an end.

Habits that are changing

For Joseph nothing has changed. A certain glamour still attaches itself in his mind to the idea of “fulltime Christian service”. He can’t help thinking that if he were to find some such position, it would give an immediate lift to his spiritual maturity. Then at last he wouldn’t feel so ineffectual in his life for God.

Until Joseph’s understanding of what God is about in this world begins to change, there’s unlikely to be any deepening of his contribution to the world of his employment.

Unresolved issues

Joseph still can’t get his mind around the false division between secular and spiritual, and the resulting value judgments over what tasks are particularly important to God. That sort of thinking is just so deeply embedded in his psyche.

So he continues to struggle with the apparent futility of his banking job. He hasn’t yet been able to explore the range of opportunities his employment offers, the ways that he could make a difference here and now.

Unanswered questions

For Joseph, these relate mainly to issues of guidance. What do I do with this strong “call” I feel I have to “the ministry”? And if I don’t pursue that leading, then won’t it mean disaster for the rest of my life – because I will have missed God’s perfect will for me?

Possible directions for Joseph to pursue

If Joseph’s friends could steer him into some such service opportunity as hospital chaplaincy, or industrial chaplaincy, or as a counselor on a crisis phone line (like Samaritans or Lifeline) – a short term of “volunteer service” might do the trick – he could be brought to see what huge contributions Christians can make alongside ordinary people.

Mark

Perspectives that have been helpful

Mark has wrestled with his difficulties as an over-worked middle manager, and is beginning to get a handle on his problem. His thinking has gone like this: God has me working in the company for a real purpose – not just for earning money and the occasional sharing of my faith with others.

So much for step one. Mark has really caught on to the concept of working with God to be an agent of change.

Habits that are changing

Step two. He's made an agreement with his wife that he won't bring work home during the weekends. Having drawn this line in the sand, Mark has been able to come to terms with the risk of losing his job. There's more to his life than his well-paid employment, he's decided.

Step three. So he has taken the step of talking (cautiously) with his manager about acceptable limits to his workload – and found the manager surprisingly receptive. Between them they've agreed that 50 hours of full-on effort is reasonable.

Unresolved issues

The emotional stress of the above three steps occupied Mark for some time. He's only now finding himself ready to look at the next question. While he sees clearly how unredeemed his employment environment is, he hasn't yet worked out how he can make a difference to the atmosphere of mistrust, low morale, and straight-out dishonesty that exists in the company. Significantly, he also hasn't been able to find other Christians who will help him work through appropriate responses to the myriad of issues he is becoming aware of.

Unanswered questions

For Mark there is still no clear connection between Sunday and the rest of the week. He finds the worship service frustratingly irrelevant.

Possible directions for Mark to pursue

Mark can profit enormously from finding like-minded friends among his Christian acquaintances. Joining a study group that wants to investigate these issues would be a huge help.

Julie

Perspectives that have been helpful

For Julie, thinking biblically about work and God's call has been a breakthrough. "Unemployed at 58" has given way to "a future of service for God wherever he takes me". She doesn't just see the potential of what God wants to do in the world ... she sees potential in her own abilities and experience for being part of God's work!

Habits that are changing

With impressive speed, she has abandoned her past mood of procrastination and inadequacy. She has looked at herself in the mirror (literally, because that's how she made the determination to change) and said: "Julie Irvine, God has so much that you could be doing with him. You don't have time to sit around and mope. For the next month, watch what crosses your path, and see how you can get involved as God's agent of change!"

Unresolved issues

For the most part, these are just the question of how to discriminate between all the things she sees that *could* be done, and the practical sense of how much she *can* take on. ("Julie Irvine," she said to her mirror just the other day, "Don't be an idiot. You may be a child of God with a brilliant eternal destiny ... but you *are* 58. You're not going to be able to sort out the whole world this year. Now sit down carefully before you go promising your support to every

organization under the sun. You have to make priorities. Which one – or maybe two – will you commit yourself to?”)

Unanswered questions

“Julie Irvine, how long have you got? Better add an exercise program to your daily schedule!”

Possible directions for Julie to pursue

As you can see, Julie’s new sense of freedom has released a bubbly enthusiasm! There’s not much to add to Julie’s good sense. Except to suggest that she might find others in the same situation she’s in. She would be a marvelous model for them, and would help them find a whole new realm of service for God.

Reflection

What about you? Now is a good time to reflect on what you’ve absorbed during the course of reading this book. Why not take some time to think about:

Some perspectives that have been helpful

Some habits that are changing

Some unresolved issues

Some unanswered questions

Some directions you might pursue

A Prayer for Our Work

Dear Lord,

We thank you that you are a worker, and you invite us to share in your work – as your partners.

We confess that sometimes we work in ways that ignore what you are doing – pretending we don't need you or that we can make a difference without you.

Forgive us for when we work compulsively – as though what we're doing is the most important thing on earth.

Forgive us when we treat our work as little more than a means to an end.

Forgive us when we fail to see that all work done in cooperation with you is good and worthwhile.

And so as we enter a new week of work:

We acknowledge afresh our dependence on you in all we put our hands to.

Help us to find dignity and purpose in every task. Particularly, Lord, in the things we find mundane or hard.

Give us vision to see where you are already working – in our homes and families, in our neighborhoods, in our places of employment, in our church life, and in our surroundings.

Fuel us with imagination to see what you want *us* to do.

Give us humility to serve without complaint, in whatever tasks are before us.

Transform *us*, as we work.

Help us to make this week of work an act of worship.

May your kingdom come, here on earth (particularly in our places of work) just as it is in heaven.

We ask this all in the name of the One who modeled what it is to work with and for you.

Amen.

Epilogue

WHY WE WROTE THIS BOOK

Alistair's story

In the first chapter of this book we quoted Calvin Redekop, a Canadian Mennonite, who wrote: *“The truth is that the average Christian spends less than 2 percent of his or her waking time at church and most of their time working. Yet the church puts most of its energy and resources into that 2 percent and very little into the world of daily work.”*

When I first read Redekop's words, many years ago, they haunted me. As a pastor I felt very challenged. The largest mission force the church has is mobilized in the world every day of the week, when Christians go about their daily work, but I was doing very little to intentionally resource and support people for this missionary encounter. In fact, I was not sure that most of my congregation even saw things that way.

Survey

As a result of my disquiet I began doing a lot of reading on the subject. However, it occurred to me that nothing could compare with actually talking face-to-face with Christians about how they understood their faith connected to their work.

As a result, I spent six months conducting one hundred in-depth interviews with individuals from predominantly evangelical, charismatic, and pentecostal church backgrounds, along with a number of discussion groups, seminars, and numerous less-formal encounters. The results of this survey changed my understanding – and my life!

Here's what I discovered:

Work is for Evangelism and Money

Most people interviewed assumed that I wanted to talk with them about how they were doing in evangelizing their workmates. In fact, most said (in a way that made both of us feel uncomfortable) that they weren't very good at it. The fact that this was their immediate assumption betrayed significant discomfort with some assumptions and expectations about evangelism as it is popularly understood. It also became obvious that the majority of interviewees assumed their church really only valued their employment for the purposes of evangelism, and earning money – so it could be given to support the church and para-church ministries.

Two Distinct Groups

At the same time, there did appear to be two distinct groups when it came to how people felt God viewed their work. On the one hand, there were those in what we might label the “helping professions” – doctors, nurses, social workers, teachers, counselors etc. These folk were generally happy to use the word “ministry” of their work in some sense. They could generally see some ways their “people-helping” work counted from God's perspective and felt the church affirmed the worth of these roles.

However, the other group consisted of people involved as factory workers, manufacturers, businesspersons, desk-bound office workers, computer programmers, engineers, and other commercial or industrial workers. These people seldom talked about their work as a form of ministry – unless it concerned talking to people about their faith. They struggled to find specific ways to connect their work to their faith, particularly the less their work had to do with people.

Hierarchy of value

Underlying many of the comments I received was a powerful hierarchy of value. While there was a general acceptance that all Christians were equal, clearly some were more equal than others. Those assumed to be of most value to God (and the church) were missionaries and pastors, followed by other “fulltime Christian workers”, then elders, and deacons. Then there were those involved as volunteers in church activities. At the bottom of the pile were those Christians solely involved in fulltime “secular” work. Although many interviewees didn’t think it should be like this, most thought that in practice this was how it was – even in their own minds.

Absence of connection between church and work

Glaringly obvious in these interviews, was the inability of people to recall any significant connecting points between their church experience and their work. In particular:

- Most people could not remember ever hearing a *sermon* or teaching on work.
- Only a couple of people could identify any *songs* sung in church that referred to work.
- Few were able to recall any *prayers* being prayed specifically about work – with the exception of ones referring to evangelism. (There were a few Episcopalians and Catholics who thought there might have been some reference to work in the intercessory portion of their liturgies, though they couldn’t remember the details.)
- Only rarely did work come up as a topic in church *small group discussions* or studies – although most pastors felt this was where people did actually talk about their work.
- People’s perception was that their *church leader/s were not interested* in their work. Most had never been visited by a church leader at work. Additionally, most business people felt their church leaders had a predominantly negative view of business, because they only used negative examples of business ethics in their preaching.
- Hardly any person was able to think of a particular Christian role-model engaged in the marketplace (apart from sports stars, pop stars, or one or two politicians (mainly William Wilberforce)).
- Most had never read a *book* or attended any *course* that talked about faith and work issues.
- Most people felt that church was competing with work and family in a way they didn’t feel good about. This left me with the feeling that faith had become associated with another set of time commitments, rather than part of the essential glue helping people integrate complex and pressured lives.
- Increasingly, people were experiencing more ethical dilemmas in a more pluralistic marketplace.
- Many interviewees said they would also appreciate help with career and life-planning decisions.

The problem of other Christians at work

Then there was the issue we noted in Chapter 9 (Work as Worship). In answer to the question, “What is the most difficult thing you experience as a Christian at work?”, many interviewees replied, “The other Christians I work with.” When I inquired why, their reasons ranged from the embarrassment of super-spiritual workmates who were excessively zealous in their talk about their faith and attempts to evangelize, but not so serious about their work, through to the sub-Christian behavior of those who publicly identified themselves as believers. This negative feedback didn’t just relate employees, either. The poor ethics of some so-called “Christian” firms and employers was cited as a major source of embarrassment and shame in some industries. The major issue was not whether a person identified themselves as Christian, but what kind of Christian they were.

Conclusions

The overwhelming impression I gained was that most Christians felt resigned to the fact that church life did not really relate to what they spent the majority of their week involved in. The majority weren’t motivated enough to do something about this without assistance. Neither did they feel that church leaders understood the kinds of work pressures and demands they experienced. Of course, people would have loved it to be different. In fact, there was a real yearning for encouragement and help, and the longer I chatted with many, the more animated they became as they realized I was serious about exploring the wider implications of faith for their work.

I concluded that in order for Christians to gain and nurture an ongoing sense of vocation (or SoulPurpose, as I came to call it), there were five important ingredients:

Connection

Understanding that our work and God’s work are connected. Gaining a sense that we are participating in something of ultimate significance, that imparts purpose to our lives. Involving both a biblical view that affirms the worth of our work (theology) and discovering ways we can nurture a sense of the presence of God in our work (spirituality).

Fit

Feeling that the person we are fits the work we are doing. This is partly about understanding how our giftedness (abilities, talents, passions, personality) makes us unique and should help to define the kind of work we are best fitted for. But it also involves an ethical fit – so that we not only work well but also believe in the worth of what we are doing and are able to see how it fits with our Christian calling and values.

Service

Christians are not happy in the long term just to be serving themselves. We need to be able to see how our work is making a worthwhile investment in God’s wider purposes and the lives of other people. We want to help create a better world.

Balance

Establishing a healthy balance in our lives that enables us to express our vocation through a healthy mix of unpaid domestic and voluntary work, rest and leisure, as well as paid

employment. Finding a sense of meaning and integration in the whole of our lives. And being able to renegotiate this balance at different stages of life.

Encouragement

Having the support and encouragement of a community of committed companions, which might include family, friends, and mentors, but which needs to also include our faith community.

Helpful resources

While it's nearly twenty years since I conducted this survey, I can still recall many of the conversations. They have helped set the course for much of what I have put my hand to since. This book is one of the outcomes – along with two other books Wayne and I have written together:

SoulPurpose: making a difference in life and work

Just Decisions: Christian ethics go to work

Additionally, you may like to have a look at our websites:

Alistair's: www.faithatwork.org.nz

Wayne's: www.ruminations.co.nz

See also, the Theology of Work Project website: www.theologyofwork.org