

## How we Understand the Idea of Work or Vocation in a Christian School

[prepared by Richard Edlin for The Scots College, Sydney, September 2018]

- Fundamental to a Scots College view of reality, is the assertion that all of life is shaped by what we believe – and Scots is founded on the belief that a Christian way of knowing and living is the best way to flourish and live a full life. Here are some comments about what a Christian perspective means when applied to the concept of work.
- This material comes from Timothy Keller's book *Every Good Endeavor – Connecting your work to God's work*, and successful businessman John Beckett's book *Loving Monday – succeeding in business without selling your soul*.
- The same thought was expressed in 1527 by William Tyndale in this way: "Now if thou compare deed to deed, there is difference betwixt washing of dishes, and preaching of the word of God; but as touching to please God, none at all."

[From a biblical perspective], work of all kinds, whether with the hands or the mind, evidences our dignity as human beings-because it reflects the image of God the Creator in us.

Biblical scholar Derek Kidner notices something profound in the creation of animals and human beings in Genesis chapter 1: Only man is set apart and given a job description, "an office" (1:26b, 28b; 2:19; cf. Ps. 8:4-8; James 3:7) In other words, while the plants and animals are called to simply "teem" and "reproduce," only humans are explicitly given a job. They are called to "subdue" and "have dominion," or rule the earth. We are given specific work to do because we are made in God's image.

It is meaningful that God himself rested after work (Genesis 2:2). Many people make the mistake of thinking that work is a curse and that something else (leisure, family, or even "spiritual" pursuits) is the only way to find meaning in life. The Bible exposes the lie of this idea. But it also keeps us from falling into the opposite mistake, namely, that work is the only important human activity and that rest is a necessary evil-something we do strictly to "recharge our batteries" in order to continue to work. We look to what we know about God to make this case. He did not need any restoration of his strength-and yet he rested on the seventh day (Genesis 2:1-3). As beings made in his image, we can assume that rest, and the things you do as you rest, are good and life-giving in and of themselves. If you make any work the purpose of your life-even if that work is church ministry, you create an idol that rivals God.

The current economic era has given us fresh impulses and new ways to stigmatize work such as farming and caring for children- jobs that supposedly are not "knowledge" jobs and therefore do not pay very well. But in Genesis we see God as a gardener, and in the New Testament we see him as a carpenter. No task is too small a vessel to hold the immense dignity of work given by God. Simple physical labour is God's work no less than a high-flying business position or the formulation of theological truth.

[The material in this box mostly is a mixture of Keller's ideas from pages 59 and 61, plus a few reflections on the same ideas from Dr. Richard Edlin.]

"Filling the earth" (Genesis 2) points to human work with intention. It means civilization, not just procreation. The perfect creator God began this work, and blessed humanity with the delightful task of finishing this work – creating culture so that some people refer to this as the cultural mandate. Farming takes the physical material of soil and seed and produces food. Music takes the physics of sound and rearranges it into something beautiful and thrilling that brings meaning to life. When we take fabric and make a piece of clothing, when we push a broom and clean up a room, when we use technology to harness the forces of electricity, when we take an unformed, naïve human mind and teach it a subject, when we teach a couple how to resolve their relational disputes, when we take simple materials and turn them into a poignant work of art – in either an obedient, God-honouring

way, or in an unfaithful, self-centred way, we are continuing God's work of forming, filling and subduing. Whenever we bring order out of chaos, whenever we draw our creative potential, whenever we elaborate and "unfold" creation beyond where it was when we found it, we are following God's pattern of creative cultural development. And this is true whether we realise it or not.

Note that in subsequent chapters of his book, Keller reminds us that often today, because of the Fall and our sinful hearts, we do these jobs insincerely and in ways that are contrary to God's creational norms – and then later, looking at the Cross and then the task of Christians to be God's agents of shalom in the culture, Keller reminds his readers of the need for Christ's followers to be creative and responsibly seek to reflect God's hope-filled intention in how we live. This acknowledges the fuller meaning of what Paul was talking about in Romans 12 when he exhorts Christians not to be conformed to this world, but to be transformed by the renewal of their minds (and subsequent cultural actions) as works of reasonable service to God.

So whether splicing a gene or doing brain surgery or collecting rubbish, attending school, or painting a picture, our work further develops, maintains, or repairs the fabric of the world. In this way, we connect to God's work. In short, work, and lots of it, is an indispensable component in a meaningful human life. It is a supreme gift from God and one of the main things that gives our lives purpose. But work must play its proper role, subservient to God. It must regularly give way not just to work stoppage for bodily repair but also to joyful reception of the world and of ordinary life.

And don't forget the joy we get by many of our recreation work activities - note the implicit, God-recognising meaning in the term "re-creation" here

Keller's insights are echoed by many reformational commentators from a variety of denominational backgrounds. Listen, for example to John Beckett. He is a very successful businessman in the US, and has a similar denominational persuasion to Presbyterians:

I can now see that the perspective of the Greeks, established so many years ago, continues alive and well to the present day, influencing and distorting our perception of work. For years, I thought my involvement in business was a second-class endeavour—necessary to put bread on the table, but somehow less noble than more sacred pursuits like being a minister or a missionary. The clear impression was that to truly serve God, one must leave business and go into "full-time Christian service." Over the years, I have met countless other Christian business people who feel the same way.

The reason is clear: Our culture is thoroughly saturated with dualism. In this view, business and most occupations are relegated to the lower, the worldly, the material realm. As such they are perceived to lack dignity, spirituality, intrinsic worth, and the nobility of purpose they deserve.

Any human endeavour can be in harmony with God's design—or in conflict. Our homes, our work, schools, medicine, sports—even sex—can be in delightful harmony with God's will or contrary to it. So the deciding factor for Christians, is not a matter of higher or lower, or sacred or secular, but whether it is in harmony with God's will.

When I saw this distinction—this contrast in worldviews—I wanted to do cartwheels. I [now] realized how much my thinking had been negatively affected by Greek dualism.

In stark contrast to my prior thinking, the Bible enabled me to view my study and my work as having great worth to God, provided I would bring it into harmony with him in every way possible. As a believer and a business person, I was no longer a second-class citizen. Nor did I need to leave my Christian convictions and biblical values outside the office entrance when I headed into work on Monday mornings.

A biblical worldview has awesome implications for Christ's followers in the secular, Greek-thinking West. As we allow it, the Bible speaks to us concerning government, economics, education, science, art, communications and, yes, business. Really, it speaks to all of life.