

Ministers' Fraternal Study Guides

The Working Lives of our Members

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A. A Brief Theology of Work

Introduction

'In a higher phase of communist society, after the enslaving subordination of the individual to the division of labour has vanished; after labour has become not only a means of life but life's prime want; after the productive forces have also increased with the all-round development of the individual, and all the springs of co-operative wealth flow more abundantly – only then can the narrow horizon of bourgeois right be crossed in its entirety and society inscribe on its banner: From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs!' (Karl Marx: *Critique of the Gotha Program*, 1875)

'Work is love made visible' (1 Thessalonians 1:3)

What is God doing in and with the world?

- Genesis 1:1 and Revelation 21-22 etc. – earth to be like heaven
- God is making the world, by creation and redemption, a place of righteousness, joy, order, beauty, loving relationships, obedience, devil exclusion, fulness/maturity, and Christ-centred praise
- And doing so through humankind, bearing the image, reflecting the glory of God and making earth like heaven according to the norms of the Word and the energies of the Spirit. The first man, Adam, ruins; the last man, Christ, restores.
- The Lord's Prayer – 'your will be done on earth as in heaven'

Work – some Biblical data

- God works – Genesis 2:2-3, Exodus 20:8-11, Psalm 111:2,6,7
- Adam works before the fall – Genesis 1:28, 2:15
- The fall changes work – Genesis 3:17-19
- The Lord Jesus Christ works – John 4:34, 5:36, 9:3-4, 17:4
- Christians work – Ephesians 4:28, 1 Thessalonians 4:11, 2 Thessalonians 3:10, Colossians 3:22-24, 1 Corinthians 15:58
- Parenthetically, The Good News and 'work' – John 6:28-9; Hebrews 4:10-11; Eph. 2:8-10

A working definition:

- 'Making an effort to make earth like heaven; taking care and using energy to see the world below like the world above...'
- 'Actively putting forth our strength in a creative and productive engagement/involvement with the world (raw material, people, ideas, things) so that God's will may be done on earth as it is in heaven.'
- Work is for all and all are to work: unemployed, children, women at home, retirees.

Further Bible reasons for work

I work...

- to please the Lord and out of my fear of Him – Eph. 6:5-9, Prov. 31:30
- to serve others – Proverbs 31:12, 1 Timothy 6:1-2
- to provide for my family – Proverbs 31:15, 21, 1 Thessalonians 4:11-12, 1 Timothy 5:8, Titus 3:14
- to give to the poor – Proverbs 31:20, Ephesians 4:28
- to win influence and respect in society, specifically to commend the Gospel – Proverbs 31:23, 21, Proverbs 12:24, 22:29, 1Thess. 4:11-12, Titus 2:9-10
- to show that Christ is Lord, to commend a God-centred life, to use gifts, provide for family, give to the poor, serve others, command respect and win influence for the Gospel

The single greatest ethical issue associated with work – WHY WORK?

- 'How' matters – stress, unemployment, business ethics, relationships but...
- Mission, ambition, drivenness/calling
- Martha and Mary – what happens when work does not flow from renewal in Christ?
- Two great errors:
 - idolise work – finding a security, significance, community, authority in work which is only truly found in Christ
 - despise work – regarding work as a means to our ends rather than God's
- lusting after a work-free way of achieving those ends
- So we are 'happy in our work' when...
 - work is 'where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet'
 - the two great commandments are lived out in one integrated life

B. The Issue Stated

- Many of our church members spend a large proportion of their time at 'work' without the Bible's teaching about work truly informing and shaping the way they think about and conduct themselves at work
- Many of our church members do not have paid employment and fail to understand that the Bible's teaching about work applies no less to them than to those who do 'have a job'
- Some ministers have very little idea about the working lives of their church members, show very little interest in them and give out signals that their 'work' is less important than their involvement in and attendance at various church programmes
- Many church members have expertise / skills / knowledge which could be of great benefit in the life of the church but is not, because they have learned, over the years, to leave them at the church door. They are de-skilled as they enter the church building
- Is this accurate, should this be, and what can we do to improve matters?

C. Further Reading

The following publications and websites may themselves be of use/interest and will, in turn provide study leads and web-links:

Christians at Work: www.christiansatwork.org.uk

Mark Greene: *Thank God it's Monday* – SU, 2001

Mark Greene: *Supporting Christians at Work* – Administry, 2001

David Prior: *Centre for Marketplace Theology Papers*, n.d.

J. Thornton and J. Kowszun: *Witness at Work* – Church Home Group Resources, 1998

The Trinity Forum: <http://www.ttf.org>

D. Questions for Discussion (pick a few)

a) for assessment

- Could your church members construct a sentence beginning, 'My job makes earth more like heaven because ...' and another beginning, 'In my job I seek first the kingdom of God by'? Which church members, why them and not others, with what sort of biblical maturity?

- How far, in our circles, is 'Christian service' equated with 'church activity' and what are the elements of truth and the dangers in this equation ?
- How, practically, do you demonstrate that your belief in the 'sufficiency of Scripture to equip us for every good work' is relevant to the working lives of your members?
- How far do you feel that the expertise/skills/knowledge of your members are unappreciated / unused in your prayer life / family life / church life and so on?
- What specifically could you do to help your members keep their mission in mind and enjoy and practise the presence of Christ at work?
- How many of the following questions could you answer about three randomly-selected church members' work?
 - What do you most wish your minister knew / understood about your working life?
 - What do you most enjoy?
 - What are the rhythms of your working day, week, month, year?
 - What's your journey to work like – how long, how, what do?
 - Who can make your life at work a misery?
 - To whom do you report and what's s/he like to work for?
 - How are things different at work now from a year ago?
 - If you could wave a magic wand at work and change two things, what would they be?
 - How do you feel on a Monday (or equivalent) morning?
 - What's the atmosphere like at work?
 - Do many people there know you're a Christian, do you think?
 - Are you ever/often asked to do/ say things that leave you feeling compromised?
 - What's the management's big thing at the moment?
 - Which are the great organisations (firms, schools etc) in your industry/locality and what are they doing right?
 - How do you see the next few years unfolding in your sector?
 - What made you move to your current job and what were you hoping for then?
 - What do your bosses' / peers' / directors' reports make of you; how would they describe you to me?
 - Are there things that you've learned at work that you wish we'd put into practice in the life of the church?
 - Are there gifts which you simply don't feel are being used at work?
 - Why does your organisation exist? What's it there for? Where do you fit into that?
 - Does it feel like you're able to connect what you do at work with your love for Christ and desire to serve him?

And also...

- How could the church better support those in business?
- Is career success of any relevance to selection and effectiveness as a church leader?
- Is there a 'Christian' management style?
- May a Christian ask for a salary increase – on what grounds?
- What issues are thrown up by evangelism at a workplace distant from our home and local church?
- Is it legitimate for a Christian to have evangelistic conversations in work time?
- How do we decide whether our job/profession/career represents our 'primary calling'?
- What factors should be weighed when promotion is offered?
- How does a Christian handle life in a blame culture?

b) for action

What, specifically, can be done?