
Ministry and Vocation

Bill James

Is the work of the pastor more important or more spiritual than the work of a Christian banker, or builder, or bus conductor, or are all employments equally valuable in the sight of God? Is it only the missionary or the preacher who has received a call to Christian service, or can you be 'called' to be a Christian full-time mother, or say that God has given you a vocation as a school teacher?

Before the Reformation, there was a clear divide between the 'spiritual' and 'secular' vocations. Physical labour was considered to be less than ideal for the truly spiritual life. While a monastic vocation would usually include some practical work—e.g. farming—this was often seen as an exercise in humility, doing something painfully menial to purify the soul. The ultimate activities were prayer and worship, and the copying of sacred texts in the monastic cell.¹

The reformers rejected this distinction. William Tyndale wrote that 'there is difference betwixt washing of dishes and preaching of the Word of God; but as touching to please God, none at all'.² Similarly, the puritan Perkins observed 'The action of a shepherd in keeping sheep ... is as good a work before God as is the action of a judge in giving a sentence, or a magistrate in ruling, or a minister in preaching'.³

Turning to the Scriptures, the apostle Paul teaches the Corinthian church to regard their daily work as their 'calling' (1 Corinthians 7:17, 24). In Corinth the church tended towards an over-spiritualised view of the Christian life and seemed to imagine that natural/physical aspects of life could be set aside. They were ready to cast off the restraints of marriage, slavery, and even Jewish/Gentile identity. The men were indifferent to their physical bodies to the point of using prostitutes. While modern forms of dualistic thinking might not err to such extremes, they suggest that it would be preferable to cast off the yoke of 'ordinary' labour, and embrace the 'spiritual' alternative of 'full-time ministry'.

Paul counters such thinking by exhorting believers not to reject the human circumstances of their lives, but rather to receive these as God's 'calling' to them.⁴ Indeed, his definition of 'calling' embraces all the details of life which God has providentially appointed, including whether they are circumcised or not, or married to a non-Christian spouse. This certainly includes all of our work, whether or not it is paid employment. We may have had some intelligent involvement in choosing our vocation. We might assess our gifts and interests, and think of where we might best serve the Lord. Or like Joseph, Daniel, Esther, or a Corinthian slave, we might simply find ourselves in a work situation which we did not consciously choose. But all is within the sovereign providence of God. We receive this as our spiritual vocation.

Paul's teaching leads us to a balanced view of the Christian life. We still live in the present created order (albeit subject to sin and the curse), and are still called to fulfil the creation mandate. There is nothing 'unspiritual' about physical life and labour;

indeed the new heavens and the new earth will have a distinctly physical character, as Paul explains in 1 Corinthians 15.

Our 'spirituality' is not defined by the work we do, rather by the spirit in which we do it. As Christian believers our overriding call is to do everything to the glory of God (1 Corinthians 10:31; Colossians 3:17, 23–24). Whatever we do to his glory is pleasing and acceptable in his sight.

This article develops the positive view of all work and service as equally valuable 'callings' from God, concluding with some practical applications for church life. To avoid associating work only with paid employment, I use the following definition of work: 'Serving God in those duties and responsibilities to which he has called us for his glory and the benefit of others'.

The Vocation of Work in a Sinful World

Those afflicted by a dualistic mindset would prefer us to be engaged only in occupations which are clearly and distinctly 'spiritual'. Yet Paul in 1 Corinthians 7 takes a different view. Obviously if a Corinthian Christian was converted as a prostitute, or a pagan priest, then clearly their new-found faith would require a change of occupation. Yet Paul encourages believers to remain in situations where there are real issues of compromise at stake. Corinthian church members were serving as slaves in ungodly households. One could argue that their service was facilitating their masters' lifestyle, yet Paul teaches that they must continue where they are.

In our modern society, there will be many Christians working for employers and companies which are far from Christian in their ethos. The profits of their enterprise may go to directors or shareholders who use the proceeds for causes which are far from Christian. So the believing employee may feel like Daniel and his friends, labouring in the civil service of Babylon. Yet this is what God has called them to.

We are reminded of the example of Naaman, converted to the God of Israel after being cleansed of his leprosy. As he set off back to the king of Aram, he asked Elisha for forgiveness because one of Naaman's duties would be to accompany the king into the temple of Rimmon and bow with him to the idol. This may strike us as great compromise, an issue on which Naaman should have been taught to take a stand. But Jacques Ellul makes the perceptive and more positive comment that at least Naaman recognises that Rimmon is an idol and that compromise will be involved. Ellul asks 'Are we so sure, when we serve idols, that we can see they are idols? ... When we choose to serve the powers that employ us, are we so sure we have the discernment of this general?'⁵ Naaman has recognised that there will always be this irreconcilable tension—of carrying Israelite soil back to his homeland to sacrifice and worship there, and yet at the same time to be a loyal servant of a regime which is hostile to Israel and a stranger to the true and living God.

These are the tensions which affect Christian people every day. In our work we seek to glorify God, yet by our faithful and diligent labour we are supporting a company, a system which is far from godly. Our employer may be involved in exploitative labour practices in the third world, promote policies which are unfriendly to the Biblical view of family, and have as their ultimate goal a materialistic and greedy profit motive. Every organisation in this world is shot through with human sinfulness. And the Christian worker has to live with this tension. Like Daniel in Babylon he may faithfully

employ his gifts and support the regime. He may be willing to read all manner of pagan literature and have to submit to training courses which are problematic from a Christian point of view (Daniel 1:4–5). Yet at other points he will take a distinctive stand and refuse to comply—as Daniel and his friends did regarding food from the king’s table, or bowing down before the statue he had made. Sometimes the Bible surprises us with where the faithful draw the lines. You cannot read the account of Joseph in Egypt without at least raising your eyebrows at his willingness to bring the whole nation into slavery to Pharaoh (Genesis 47:20ff).

From this perspective, the work of the pastor or other ‘full-time Christian worker’ is very simple by comparison. We are called to live by the Scriptures and to apply their teaching in our churches as comprehensively and consistently as we can. But our congregations go out into the world where they constantly have to juggle priorities and principles and make wise judgments about drawing lines around compliance and compromise. If we tend towards a secular/spiritual divide, then a ‘purely spiritual’ occupation will of course be more appealing. But that is not the Biblical position. Rather it is the calling of the pastor to teach and preach the word of God so that the principles of truth and practice will be clearly evident, enabling believers to make wise judgments in the tensions and pressures of life in the midst of a sinful world.

The Vocation of Work in a Perishing World

It is a sense of calling which gives to the Christian worker his sense of purpose. Too often have I heard the complaint ‘What I am doing now has no meaning. It is just doing a job, producing goods, which will all finally perish when the Last Great Day arrives. If only I was in Christian ministry ...’

It is possible, of course, to be driven to cynicism by the frustrations of work in this present world. As the writer of Ecclesiastes expressed it:

What does a man get for all the toil and anxious striving with which he labours under the sun? All his days his work is pain and grief; even at night his mind does not rest. This too is meaningless (Ecclesiastes 2:22–23 NIV).

But that is not a Christian view of work. Because we are not simply working for perishable things, and mortality and decay. We are working for the Lord. It is that sense of labouring for him that lends dignity and meaning to our labours. This is the work which he has called us to do; he might have called us elsewhere to do other things, but for now he has given us a sacred trust of the job we have at hand. And so we trust that while so much will perish into dust yet he will ‘establish the work of our hands’ (Psalm 90:17). There is a value in all labour done for his glory; in his eternal economy we know that our ‘labour in the Lord is not in vain’ (1 Corinthians 15:58). Even at work we fulfil our calling to glorify God and enjoy him forever—at work, in our work, and through our work.

The Vocation of Work as a Valued Ministry

If we are to reflect Biblical teaching, then we must insist on the equal value in the sight of God of all callings, whether they be as Bible teacher or classroom teacher, whether church planter or farmer, whether international banker or Christian missionary. It is not that one is more ‘spiritual’ than the other, but simply that God has given to each

member of the church distinctive gifts and a particular calling as the sphere in which we are to work out our Christian obedience. Nor is the working life of a Christian to be regarded as an unfortunate necessity, or an inconvenience which limits the time we can give to church activities or reading our Bibles. No—we have been called by God not only to be Christians, but to be Christian office workers, or builders, or lawyers, or full-time mothers, or computer techies, or whatever our vocation might be. That is our spiritual service.

We can be rather attached to the notion of the ‘superiority’ of the calling or vocation of the ‘full-time Christian worker’ (which implies that other Christians are only part-timers?). We say that many of our church members have ‘secular’ employment, whereas the pastor is called to ‘spiritual’ ministry. We can suggest that when someone is ‘called to the ministry’ that involves a special sense of call and vocation which other less privileged believers do not share. Yet the Biblical foundations of such convictions are distinctly shaky. There are clear accounts of supernatural and direct ‘calls’ to the Old Testament prophets, to the apostles and especially to Paul. But at the end of the New Testament age, when the emphasis shifted away from such foundational ministries to the callings of eldership and evangelist, there was no such expectation of direct revelation. Paul teaches Timothy to train the next generation of church leaders by entrusting to them the Gospel tradition ‘... the things you have heard me say ... entrust to reliable men who will also be qualified to teach others’ (2 Timothy 2:2). The emphasis is more on the church leadership to select and to train than on the individual to receive a ‘call’ in some sense more mysterious or spiritual than any other.

It is a wonderful privilege to be called to spend your working life studying, teaching and preaching the Word of God. It is a great responsibility to be a herald of the Gospel of Jesus Christ to a world which needs to hear the message of salvation. Yet in God’s economy these are callings of equal value in his sight with those who have different gifts and work for him in different ways. And we are not to look across at other members of the body and regard them as inferior because they have different gifts or are working in a different sphere to our own. That is precisely what Paul condemns (1 Corinthians 12:21ff): ‘The eye cannot say to the hand, “I don’t need you!” And the head cannot say to the feet, “I don’t need you!”’

We need to consider, very briefly, how we apply these principles to church life. There is space only to make a few practical observations:

We need to strive for balance in urging believers to consider pastoral, missionary or evangelistic work.

Great wisdom is needed here. We can rightly emphasise the needs of the church and of the world. There are sometimes those within our churches who have the gifts for missionary service, and simply have not grasped the desperate needs of the world for preachers, teachers and evangelists, not to mention the host of support ministries required in the missionary enterprise. Some believers might be trapped in materialism, or unwilling to step outside the comfort zone of their present employment and lifestyle.

Yet in making these needs known, the dangers are also clearly evident. We can too easily suggest (implicitly if not explicitly) that the truly spiritual will want to go into ‘full-time ministry’. In our churches it is only the missionaries whose colour photos adorn our noticeboards, and whose prayer letters demand our attention, to pray for their

every need. There is little or no attention given to the Christian accountant, or midwife, or engineer who faces constant tensions and ethical dilemmas in seeking to live out a Christian life in the workplace. Or the full-time mother facing the pressures and frustrations of childcare, and trying to take opportunities to befriend neighbours at the school gate. How much teaching is given to these issues of everyday Christian life in the workplace? And is there any practical support to be found? If we are to follow Paul's teaching and regard every employment as God's vocation for our lives, then we need to help and support each one, as each member of the body plays its part.

In any organisation, it is a tendency of the leaders to recruit people like themselves, and to try and influence their workers to become more like them. So in church leadership the pastor's burden for his own ministry may well translate into a desire to see as many as possible in 'Christian' work. But when the Roman soldiers and tax collectors (hardly 'spiritual' professions!) came to John the Baptist he taught them not to change their job, but to work faithfully, honestly, and with integrity. That is to be our emphasis too.

We need to respect the demands placed on those who are called to high-pressure employment.

Working life today is typically characterised by long hours and stress. This is a cycle which is difficult to escape. An individual believer might choose to change their job or at least refuse a promotion to avoid the all-consuming demands of the office, but then struggle with the different challenge of frustration in doing a job which is well below their capacity.

At church, we too easily measure the spirituality of each member by their attendance at meetings or involvement in church activities. 'He is hardly ever at the prayer meeting.' Or in contrast 'She is so faithful in doing children's work'. We want our members to settle with us for many years, not to move away to make the next step in their career.

It is true that church involvement may simply be a question of priorities or commitment. But what of the believer who is called to work in a job with long hours, or travel which takes him away for one or more nights each week? One church member may have ample time and gifts to serve as a deacon, while another may not be often seen, not even always on Sundays. But is the latter then less spiritual? Or is it that the Lord has given to them a different calling, of equal value in his sight? If so, then his labours in the office are just as much to the glory of God as leading a children's club or preaching on Sunday morning. And he is in great need of our prayers for the Lord to uphold him in the challenging lifestyle he maintains.

We need to affirm the value of work as a Christian calling, not simply as a platform for evangelism.

Without God's wise providence of calling believers to so many different spheres of human activity, how could we operate as salt and light within our world? If Christians are not involved, then we will make no impact. If all the spiritually mature, gifted and zealous believers retreated into 'the ministry', how impoverished our world would be!

Paul reminds us of the great impact of a faithful Christian testimony at work in Titus 2:9-10. Yet it is interesting to notice that Paul's emphasis is on working hard and

working well. He speaks of being subject to our masters, trying to please them, **not** talking back, not stealing, showing that we can be fully trusted. And by this means the teaching of the Gospel is made attractive. The emphasis is not on verbal witness.

Of course we should pray for, and take, opportunities to speak to our workmates about Christ (1 Peter 3:15–16). But if we see our employment simply as another opportunity for evangelism, then we have slipped back into the secular/spiritual mentality and are thinking of work being worthy only insofar as it is a vehicle for the ‘spiritual’ ministry of evangelism. Rather, Paul speaks of the Christian testimony of the work *itself* being of value and being done diligently to the glory of God. We are to rejoice in doing our work well in the Name of Christ.

I close with the testimony of Calvin Seerveld about his father who was a Christian fishmonger:

I remember a Thursday afternoon long ago when my Dad was selling a large carp to a prosperous woman and it was a battle to convince her. ‘Is it fresh?’ The fish fairly bristled with freshness. It had just come in. But the game was part of the sale. They had gone over it anatomically together: the eyes were bright, the gills were in good colour, the flesh was firm, the belly was even spare and solid, the tail showed not much waste, the price was right ... Finally my Dad held up the fish behind the counter, ‘Beautiful, beautiful! Shall I clean it up?’ And as she grudgingly assented, ruefully admiring the way the bargain had been struck, she said, ‘My, you certainly didn’t miss your calling’.

Unwittingly she spoke the truth. My father is in full-time service for the Lord—prophet, priest and king in the fish business ... When I watch my Dad’s hands—big beefy hands with broad stubby fingers each twice the thickness of mine—they could never play a piano—when I watch those hands delicately split the back of a mackerel ... twinkling at work without complaint, past temptation, always in faith consecratedly cutting up fish before the face of the Lord—when I see that, I *know* God’s grace can come down to a man’s hands and the flash of a scabby fish knife.⁶

Those fish are now long gone. But that fishmonger wasn’t working ultimately for the fish, nor even for his customers, but for the glory of God. So the value of his work endures.

- 1 Alister McGrath ‘Roots that Refresh’ in *Faith in the Everyday World: The Dignity of Human Work* (Hodder & Stoughton, 1992), pp. 139ff.
- 2 Quoted in Leyland Ryken, *Redeeming the Time: A Christian Approach to Work and Leisure*, (Baker, 1995), p. 104.
- 3 *Ibid.*
- 4 Amongst the commentators, Gordon Fee in the NICNT series is reluctant to see in this passage a specific affirmation of God’s call to particular circumstances of life; rather our life-situation is the arena in which we are to work out our ‘call’ (i.e. salvation). However his view is not shared by the older commentators, including Calvin. Furthermore it is debatable if the thrust of Fee’s position makes very much practical difference to the application of the text.
- 5 Jacques Ellul, *The politics of God and the politics of man* (Eerdmans, 1972), pp. 37–38.
- 6 Quoted in ‘Christians at Work’ Briefing Paper ‘Thinking Biblically about Work—Part 2—Redemption and Work’.

Bill James is pastor of Emmanuel Evangelical Church, Leamington Spa.
