

Work between Creation and Re-creation

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Abstract

This article develops biblical notions about work. People expect happiness from working hard, and many achieve that goal. However, some suffer from stress-related complaints and burnout, and some occupations also contribute to the global ecological crisis. However, many people also seek to regain the meaningfulness of work for their fellow human beings, society, and the environment. Theology can speak to the issue of work with its two faces. Work should be seen from the perspectives of creation and re-creation. It has not only instrumental value (regarding livelihood, character formation, exercise in moderation, and care for creation) but also inherent value. This notion is essential for regaining joy in work.

Keywords

Work, labor, creation, re-creation, vita activa, creation mandate, vocation

Human life is mainly *vita activa* (active life). For many people, activity is a source of happiness. They expect happiness from working hard, and many achieve their goals. However, there is another side to this as well. More than once, people have suffered from stress and burnout. Moreover, some occupations also contribute to the global ecological crisis. Hence, there are pleas in our Western world for regaining joy at work in the rat race, and there are also

many people who want to make meaningful contributions to their fellow human beings, society, and the environment through their work.¹

Theology cannot ignore this active life with its two faces. Because it can give biblical guidelines regarding the well-being of man and society, theology has a message for humans in this area of life as well, primarily as a promise to anyone who works.

Work is understood to mean any compulsory and ordered activity with the primary aim of meeting the needs of people and society, creation, and culture. It can therefore be briefly defined as *vita activa* minus leisure activities and liturgical acts.² All kinds of activities are included: supply of food, care, and education; production and maintenance of goods; management of society and organizations; services; and every other activity from daily chores to a global project. Theology can help people regain joy in their work. It has a message about being human in all types of work, paid and unpaid, voluntary and forced, at home and elsewhere. This article outlines some theological notions that serve people and society in work situations.

I. *Origin*

The first theological notion concerns the creation of work: God gave people dominion over the earth and every living creature (Gen 1:28–29). They must work the ground so that crops can grow (Gen 2:5, 15). In this way, divine providential care for the world takes shape. People became coworkers with God—or, as Martin Luther formulated it, the mask of him who continues to take care of his own creation.³ Not only does God call his image to work, but the order of creation also speaks. People must therefore respond to the appeal that comes to them from the created reality. In addition, they have the task not only to care for the divine work of creation but also to develop what is potentially present in it. This high position of people as God's image becomes immediately apparent in the naming of the animals (Gen 2:19).

Men and women must work together. They are the image of God not only individually but also together, herein symbolizing the task of humankind in

¹ Govert Buijs, *Waarom werken we zo hard? Op weg naar een economie van de vreugde* (Amsterdam: Boom, 2019).

² Cf. R. C. Kwant, *Filosofie van de arbeid*, *Filosofie en cultuur* 1 (Antwerpen: De Nederlandsche boekhandel, 1964), 11–34; Miroslav Volf, *Work in the Spirit: Toward a Theology of Work* (1991; repr., Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2001), 7–14.

³ Martin Luther, “Der 147. Psalm, Lauda Jerusalem, ausgelegt, 1532,” in *D. Martin Luther Werke*, 120 vols. (Weimar, 1883–2009) [hereafter, *WA*], 31/I:436.

general. In performing their tasks, everyone uses his or her own possibilities, gifts, and talents. This connectedness implies mutual service. Work consists not only in caring for the earth but also in caring for each other.

Work is a gift from God, so it must be performed with gratitude. From the perspective of creation, work thus honors the Giver, has inherent value, and is—regardless of the result—a cheerful activity. John Calvin notes that Adam was created in paradise to work with joy. Labor was comparable to play—sweet delight.⁴ Not only was this playful work aimed at livelihood, but it also reflected a joyful surrender to God and voluntary service to the neighbor. It was an expression of faith that God would give his blessing.

The fall, however, affected all human existence: thorns and thistles grow in the field, people must eat their food by the sweat of their brows (Gen 3:17–19, 23) all their lives (Eccl 1:3), and the results are not guaranteed (Ps 127:2a). Fatigue and restlessness, worry and disappointment await. Psalm 90 says, according to the Lutheran translation (1912), that our whole life is characterized by this: “Wenn’s köstlich gewesen ist, so ist es Mühe und Arbeit gewesen” (“When it was costly, there was effort and work,” v. 10).⁵ Working hard could have destructive consequences for physical and psychological well-being. The Israelites had to experience great misery and sorrow from their slave labor in Egypt and in the promised land itself. Work, as Calvin says, has taken on a slavish character, as of someone condemned to the quarry.⁶

For many, work is literally slave labor. The fall has thoroughly disrupted the relationship between man and his labor. In ancient Greece, those who ran city-state government and citizens who participated in making state decisions looked down on all the work people did for a livelihood because such activity did not accomplish anything permanent. This attitude may have arisen because men and women from conquered nations were taken to the homes of their conquerors and labor was increasingly associated with slavery. Ultimately, the one who performed the heaviest physical work was in the lowest position on the social ladder. What had to be done for sustenance was considered equivalent to slave labor: the person who was subject to necessity was considered but a toiling animal and scarcely worthy of being called human. This ethos made it all the more necessary for citizens of the *polis* to keep slaves. Eventually, life apart from labor was considered so important in the *polis* that every kind of manual work was denigrated. Occupations were classed and

⁴ John Calvin, *Commentaries on the First Book of Moses Called Genesis*, trans. John King (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1948), 1:174 (on Gen 3:17).

⁵ Cf. <https://www.bible.com/nl/bible/51/PSA.90.DELUT>.

⁶ Calvin, *Genesis*, 1:174.

ranked on the social ladder in inverse proportion to the degree of physical exertion required. Although this distinction between work for subsistence and work for the public good continued for a long time, it disappeared under the influence of the philosophers, who emphasized contemplation, with the result that political activity too was devalued.⁷

Each period of history—the agricultural culture, the culture of manufacturing, the industrialized society, and finally the information society—has brought with it its own brokenness in the relationship between people and their labor. People still suffer from appalling working conditions, exploitation, and discrimination—children not excluded. Excessive scientific management alienates people from their work in favor of increasing profits for shareholders. Human freedom and creativity are violated. For many people, work does not really improve the development of their gifts and talents. Sometimes, working people are seen as a mere means to profit for management and shareholders.

While classical antiquity looked down on manual labor, the socialist movement disdained white-collar work. This movement does not deem anything that does not meet the criterion of productivity worthy of being called labor. Karl Marx stated that people distinguish themselves from animals in that people can use their creativity in work and potentially realize themselves; non-productive labor, on the other hand, is parasitic. The socialist movement rightly criticized the misery of exploitation and other dire working conditions. Masses of workers became alienated from the products of collective processes and did not experience the fulfillment of their humanity through their work. In contemporary society, the relationship between people and their work is still seriously disrupted: they lack job satisfaction, they are exploited, they have no possibility for the further development of their gifts and talents, and they slide into laziness.

However, the disruption of the relationship between man and his work is also reflected in an exaggerated valuation of productive labor. According to Georg F. W. Hegel, work is a path to freedom, and Marx agreed with him. This exaggerated valuation of work took on terrible forms in National Socialism (see, for instance, the slogan *Arbeit macht frei*, “work makes free”) and in the communist systems of the twentieth century. In liberalism, however, the estimation of the value of labor was also high. Adam Smith pointed out the benefits of productive labor as a means of raising the standard of living of all of society. His liberal view of self-interest as the

⁷ Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, With an Introduction by Margaret Canovan, 2nd ed. (1958; repr., Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 81–85.

engine on which the economy runs has left an enduring mark on the Western world.

People expect a lot from paid work: consumption, self-realization, expression of authenticity, and prestige. Work has thus become a religion, a basic trust. As Thomas Carlyle put it, *laborare est orare* (“to work is to pray”). Because of work, it is thought, man can become what he otherwise could not have been. Another way of putting it is *laboro, ergo sum* (“I work, therefore I am”). Scientific and technological work enables societies to be organized according to their own models. The manufactured society must be a successful society with happiness as the product of its own design.

The tendency to place a high value on productive labor became particularly visible when it was seen as the means no longer to mere survival but rather to promote prosperity and wealth. Adam Smith’s model, based on an “invisible hand” that ensures that economic self-interest ultimately serves the good of society as a whole, offered anything but a solution to the global problem of degrading working conditions, poverty, and unemployment.

The brokenness in the relationship between people and their work is further seen in the opposition within social contexts, such as marriage and family, companies and organizations, countries and peoples. Disrespectful behavior and irreconcilability hinder cooperation according to God’s intention. This brokenness is evident in all relationships in which humans stand, including their relationships with themselves and their relationships with God. The concern for sustenance can be so great that it affects spiritual life and people become alienated not only from their labor but also from their Creator. Moreover, work apart from God is an idol and a destructive tool in the hands of godless men. The present time shows that scientific and technical work can take on demonic forms. In addition, this brokenness is reflected in the neglect of the natural environment and the well-being of animals. Scientific and technical works not only are a blessing but can also bring about a great curse.

II. General Goodness

Scripture also testifies to the unspeakable goodness shown by God after the fall: he immediately promised restoration of what had been violated. Through their work, he continues to use people to care for his world. Abel became a shepherd and Cain a farmer, the culture receiving a tremendous boost through the latter. Jabal was the progenitor of herdsman, Jubal of all who play lyre and flute, and Tubal-Cain of all bronze and iron smiths (Gen 4:17–22). Noah was a farmer and planted a vineyard (Gen 9:20).

God sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous (Matt 5:45) so they all can see the fruit of their work. As long as the earth exists, there will be sowing and reaping, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night (Gen 8:22). Therefore, all hard work is profitable (Prov 14:23). Thanks to God's providence, people go out to their work until evening (Ps 104:23). By using people in his care for all of reality, he connects people with each other. Lamech names his son Noah because he will comfort his relatives in their labor and in the painful toil of their hands (Gen 5:29).

God saves his world from destruction by this providential order. Work is possible thanks to his patience, and people can also enjoy their work.⁸ They can experience it not only as a means of sustenance, development of their gifts, and formation of their characters, but also as a purpose in itself. In this way, they can experience the good of creation. There can therefore be a shared joy, as shown by the farmer and his new servant: "And with one accord the toiling couple / has *enjoyed* the laborious field work."⁹ God has, according to Calvin, somewhat softened the harshness of the penalty for the fall by allowing people to experience some joy in their work.¹⁰

In addition, religious work is not deemed more valuable than manual labor. There is nothing inferior about fetching water and chopping wood, according to Clement of Alexandria, who also points out that King Pittacus of Miletus worked in a mill and Jacob tended Laban's flocks.¹¹ Likewise, the Reformers—in contrast to the Roman Catholic Church—regarded daily labor as being no less valuable than the *vita contemplativa*, and they repudiated the effect of ancient Greek anthropology on theology. According to Calvin, even the lowest work can shine brightly and be very precious as long as it is done in obedience to the calling of God.¹² Therefore, employers must always treat their employees with respect and take care of their well-being.¹³

God continues to address people regarding their initial mission, namely, to rule and cultivate the earth wisely and to care for their neighbors. They will be held accountable for this. However, the Most High is also the one who has planned for salvation so that he can restore and renew the ordering of work in creation.

⁸ Cf. Helmut Thielicke, *Theologische Ethik* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1965), II/1: §1506.

⁹ In Dutch, "En zwiigend heeft 't zwoegend paar / Het moeizaam akkerwerk genóten." Willem de Mérode, *Het boek van de arbeid*, ed. K. G. Boon et al. (Amsterdam: De Arbeiderspers, 1957), 163.

¹⁰ Calvin, *Genesis*, 1:174 (on Gen 3:17).

¹¹ Clement of Alexandria, *Paedagogus* 3.10.

¹² John Calvin, *Institutes* 3.10.6.

¹³ Calvin, *Institutes* 2.8.46.

III. *Renewal*

The divine plan of salvation pertains to all human existence, including activities. God promised Abraham and his descendants a rich blessing. Israel was given the privilege of living in a land that would flow with milk and honey. That is why his people pray for that blessing (Ps 90:17). They may, according to God's promise, enjoy the fruits of their labor and be happy (e.g., Ps 128:1–2). In Israel, it became apparent in a new way that God regards people as coworkers in his care for his world. Households work on their own land and tend their livestock (Exod 20:9–10). A woman who is zealous and joyful in making garments of wool and linen is to be praised (Prov 31:13–31).

YHWH is deeply involved in the day-to-day work of his people. He is, according to Isaiah, the source of agricultural knowledge and teaches the farmer everything he must do (Isa 28:24–29). The Hebrew Scriptures deemed those who worked with their hands no less valuable than those who did administrative work. The carpenters, architects, and masons who repaired the temple in Jerusalem in the time of King Josiah were called “trustworthy men” (cf. 2 Kgs 22:6–7). Bezalel, who was in charge of the design and realization of the tent of meeting, was filled with the Spirit of God. He had wisdom and insight and was gifted in all kinds of craft: making objects of gold, silver, and bronze, using precious stones, and carving. God, through his Spirit, had also given great skill to other craftsmen (Exod 31:2–6). They were engravers, designers, weavers, and embroiderers in blue, purple, and scarlet yarn and fine linen (Exod 35:34–35).

In ancient Israel, work was a means by which God gave his blessing. His involvement in it was a source of comfort. Those who feared the Lord believed that they would eat the fruit of their labor and that blessings and prosperity would be theirs (cf. Ps 128:2). In contrast, disobedience would affect the Israelites in their working lives. He would then break down their stubborn pride and make the sky above them like iron and the ground beneath them like bronze. Then their strength would be spent in vain because their soil would not yield its crops, nor would the trees of their land yield their fruit (Lev 26:20).

In ancient Israel, daily work was primarily a means of meeting needs. To this end, the Israelites had to work six days a week (Exod 20:9; 16:26). Wisdom therefore incites zeal (Prov 6:6–11). The development of culture and the manufacture of all kinds of goods also fit in with this. In this way, YHWH wanted to take care of his people. When we can work, we are fed and

clothed by him who feeds and clothes people.¹⁴ God, who cares for his creatures, commands man to act accordingly. His sovereignty goes hand-in-hand with human responsibility; they do not compete.

In particular, the Sabbath was a sign of this providential care of YHWH. On this holy day, the Israelites celebrated the fact that they could place their work in God's hands, enjoy his care, and look forward to the time when the curse on the earth would be completely removed and the struggle for livelihoods would be over. This day called the Israelites' attention to God's work and reminded them that they could not secure their own existence (cf. Exod 20:11). Associated with this sign were the Sabbath year and the Jubilee (Lev 25:11). All work was put into perspective. The Israelites could do their work in dependence on God. In addition, the Festival of Harvest, with the first fruits of the crops the Israelites sowed in their field, and the Festival of Ingathering at the end of the year reminded them of divine providence (cf. Exod 23:16).

The prophets of Israel proclaimed that in the messianic realm, too, the creative gift of work would continue to exist. Plowshares and pruning hooks have not lost their function (Isa 2:4; Mic 4:3). The people of the New Jerusalem will build houses and dwell in them. They will plant vineyards and eat their fruit. They will not labor in vain (Isa 65:21, 23). Farmers and shepherds will live together (Jer 31:24). The mountains of Israel will be plowed and sown (Ezek 36:9). The prophets portray a glorious future with earthly images. The Messiah brings salvation to all aspects of creation, including daily work. The results of this work that can stand the divine test are taken into the messianic realm. This means that daily work is measured not only by the creative work of God but also by his re-creation. God does not just throw away his world or people's accomplishments that are in accordance with his commands. People exercise not only a creation mandate but also an eschatological mandate.¹⁵ God also promises the restoration and renewal of work relationships. According to the gospel, people in his realm are governed by love, fidelity, forgiveness, and respectful dealings with each other.

IV. Fulfillment

God has fulfilled his promise of redemption in Christ and through him has already restored and renewed his creation, including the creative gift of

¹⁴ Cf. Augustine, *De opere monachorum* (*The Work of Monks*), 35.

¹⁵ Cf. Darell Cosden, *A Theology of Work: Work and the New Creation*, Theological Monographs (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2006), 46.

work, for those who believe this fulfillment is already a reality. Christ has delivered everyone who believes from the power of evil. Despite this reality, however, they still suffer the consequences of evil, but they may look forward to the day when the effects of the power of evil will also be over and Christ's victory will be a reality in perfect glory.

Daily work that is separated from God, however, is a power that exalts itself against him. This power manifests itself strongly in today's Western society. For many, hard work dominates everyday life not only because of the necessity and duty to work but also because people choose it themselves. Many people even expect their greatest happiness to come from work, and as a result, it takes over their whole lives. The point is that work then becomes an obstacle to faith.

The gospel, however, proclaims that Christ is supreme over every power and authority (cf. Col 2:10, 15). Christians are placed, together with Christ, above every earthly power and can use this powerful position as a tool. In this knowledge, they perform their daily work (cf. Col 3:17) and seek to do what their Lord desires. They do not live like other people or share their ideas about working life (cf. Eph 4:17); instead, they approve the will of God—what is good and pleasing to him and is perfect (Rom 12:2). In principle, their relationship to work has been restored. Labor is no longer a power that dominates them but an instrument that they use for their task as God's steward on earth. They are put in the position that Adam initially stood in. Thus, thanks to Christ, they may regard themselves as God's coworkers who care for the world with joy, gratitude, and modesty.

In addition to regarding work as something to be taken seriously, believers may perform their work with a certain degree of relaxation. They realize that their ultimate hope is not therein and that they are not justified by their good works before the supreme judge. Their lives do not depend on the results of their efforts, and they cannot thereby secure their existence. Their only holdfast is Christ. Whatever they receive as a result of their work is in their view a divine gift. God provides for the needs of his children (Ps 127:2b; Matt 6:24–34).

Believers' work ultimately bears the character of service to Christ (Eph 6:5–8). As all things are created for him (Col 1:15–20), so is labor. In fact, believers' connection to Christ is even more intimate: because Christ lives in them (Gal 2:20), Christ himself is ultimately the one who works. He has made it possible for believers to accept the gift of labor in gratitude and for this gift to be sanctified through the word of God and through prayer (1 Tim 4:4). Only in Christ can work flourish. Dietrich Bonhoeffer notes that the original image of work appears to lie in the heavenly realm: labor is the

creative service of God and Christ to the world and of men to God.¹⁶ God wants to work in the world through Christ. Work should be focused.¹⁷ The biblical work ethic, says Walther Bienert, is an ethos of *laborare ex oratione*: working from prayer.¹⁸ The perfect flourishing of that work will be in God's new world.

In their work, Christians consider not only the ordering of God in creation but also the divine kingdom that has come in Christ and will one day come in full glory. On that day, God will fully restore and renew what has been broken. The church confesses the resurrection of the *material* body, which requires a similarly *material* environment. The earth is promised as an inheritance. Scripture therefore paints a future in earthly colors. Christ showed some aspects of that future in his works on earth and is still setting up signs of his kingdom. Work that is purified and sanctified by him has eternal value. Despite its flaws and shortcomings, it will continue to exist and, by God's grace, provide the building blocks of the glorious new world.¹⁹

In that world, the work of the godless will not be forgotten. Bonhoeffer speaks of the city built by Cain as a prefigure of the eternal city of God and notes that thanks to the invention of musical instruments, people can get a foretaste of heavenly music. Just as metals serve to decorate houses, treasures of gold and precious stones adorn the heavenly city. Metals also serve to make the sword of retributive justice.²⁰ So it may be that the worker perishes, but his work continues to exist. Thus, daily work purified and sanctified by Christ may share in the glorious eschatological renewal of the present world.²¹ This new world is one standard by which work in the present time can be assessed.

The expectation of this renewal can motivate any worker in heavy and laborious work and give work ultimate meaning. At the same time, it places this work into perspective. Only by grace can it be a building block of the new earth. This knowledge prevents self-exaltation. The new creation is entirely the work of God. He is therefore the only one who decides which work can withstand the test. The eternity perspective therefore also provides motivation to work in obedience to God. On the last day, each person's

¹⁶ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethik*, ed. Eberhard Bethge, 10th ed. (1949; repr., Munich: Kaiser 1984), 351.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 220.

¹⁸ Walther Bienert, *Die Arbeit nach der Lehre der Bibel: Eine Grundlegung evangelischer Sozialethik* (Stuttgart: Evangelisches Verlagswerk, 1954), 390.

¹⁹ Hendrikus Berkhof, *Christus: De zin der geschiedenis* (Nijkerk: Callenbach, 1958), 179–80.

²⁰ Bonhoeffer, *Ethik*, 222.

²¹ Cosden, *Theology*, 144–76; Volf, *Work in the Spirit*, 79–122.

work will come to light, and the fire will test the quality of that work (1 Cor 3:12–13).

V. Attitude

Because the redemption by Christ has cosmic dimensions, the world of work is also in principle restored and renewed. Therefore, Christians work in renewed gratitude to God the Father (Col 3:17). In doing so, they respond not only to the providential care of God but also to his acts of salvation.²² Christ restored his followers to their original position as coworkers with God. Believers may answer in gratitude and perform their work in view of the glorified world yet to come. The relationship to Christ therefore provides special encouragement. Hence, Luther said that believers can bear the burden of their daily work easily, cheerfully, and with good courage.²³ In any case, for Christians, work is accompanied by an inner attitude, a shadow work, so to speak, and a reflection on how this work benefits their neighbors. In this way, work that consists of mind-numbing, repetitive actions may also acquire a more joyful dimension. Those actions will only cause real damage to workers if they are mentally imprisoned by such work.²⁴ Believers are not subject to a foreign power, not even the power of work that does not do justice to their humanity. This does not eliminate the need for improvement in the world of labor, which will remain until the Last Day. Gratitude is therefore not the same as being passive; rather, it goes along with a commitment to improving working conditions.

Fundamental to believers is the will of God. In all things, they should first seek God's kingdom and his righteousness (cf. Matt 6:33). This requires setting priorities. Jesus consistently pointed this out to his disciples. He had called them away from their daily work to follow him, and Mary chose the better part, listening to his teaching, over the work of serving guests (cf. Luke 10:38–42). Jesus warned against setting other priorities, such as viewing a newly purchased field or inspecting oxen (Luke 14:15–24), if this would hinder following him. But, in the end, daily work does not compete with the following of Christ. It takes shape precisely in the everyday practice of the worker.²⁵ Faith must shine through all the activities of the Christian.

²² Cf. David H. Jensen, *Responsive Labor: A Theology of Work* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2006), 43–66.

²³ Martin Luther, "In XV Psalmos graduum [On the Fifteen Psalms of Ascent], 1532/33 [1540]," in *WA*, 40/III:280–81 (on Ps 128:2).

²⁴ Brian Brock, *Christian Ethics in a Technological Age* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 310.

²⁵ Cf. Martin Luther, "Hauspostille, 1544," in *WA*, 52:62.

This is particularly evident in the work done in the Christian congregation. Karl Barth made this point by arguing that the participation of believers in the service of the church takes precedence over all other activities. There, the active life of people stands in a direct analogy with divine action. Daily work is but the surface layer of what they do, just as the work of God in his providence is the outside of his work in election and reconciliation. What believers do in and through their faith communities is their actual and essential activity. Daily work is necessary for survival, and survival is necessary for faith and service. Thus, daily work is important primarily because it makes the actual work possible.²⁶

Bonhoeffer also speaks of this orientation of daily work toward Christ and the cocreation of the believer with God. The divine mandate regarding work creates a work that waits for Christ, is focused on him, is open to him, serves him, and glorifies him.²⁷ The idea that work in the Christian community is of supreme value does not contradict the idea that daily work has its own value.

The renewal that Christ has brought also provides a new, peaceful connection between people in their work. In Christ, there is neither master nor servant, employer nor employee, director nor secretary (cf. Gal 3:28). This peaceable solidarity is expressed in respectful interaction between people in the workplace. There is forgiveness for those who fail and patience with those who fall short. However, gracious association implies neither cheap grace nor sentimentality. Persistent disrespectful behavior requires correction; love in Christ does not preclude sharp words. Moreover, no one in the workplace should be seen as merely a means to achieve the company's objectives; coworkers' self-worth and humanity must always be kept in mind.

VI. *Sanctification*

Another notion in Scripture is the guidance of the Holy Spirit in believers' work. The Spirit equips them with skills, gifts, and talents. To this end, he ties in with the constitution of believers, their social relationships, and their positions in society. What do Christians have that they did not receive (1 Cor 4:7)?

The Spirit also causes them to dislike what is not in accordance with the will of God in work situations. Furthermore, believers also experience joy

²⁶ Karl Barth, *Kirchliche Dogmatik* (Zollikon-Zurich: Evangelischer Verlag, 1951), III/4:590–91.

²⁷ Bonhoeffer, *Ethik*, 222.

in their work as a gift of the Spirit and make a cheerful commitment to accomplish something good, either directly through their work or indirectly through their income. In this way, their working attitude is sanctified. The Spirit helps people imitate Christ in their daily work and keeps them from piling up riches for themselves (Luke 12:13–21).

Reformers such as Luther²⁸ and Calvin²⁹ underlined this spiritual dimension of daily work by the word “calling” (*vocatio*). God calls people to a certain task not only in the spiritual field (in a *vita contemplativa*, “contemplative life”) but also in their daily lives. This *vocatio externa* (“external calling”) results in a social position or a profession. It is emphasized that believers in obedience to God must take care of the needs of their neighbors and societies.

However, the idea of vocation does not bind Christians to their status quo. People, as the image of God, are not statues. The same God who calls also gives his Spirit and wants believers to develop their gifts and talents. This pneumatological approach is complementary to the vision of work as a divine vocation, which could give the impression that one may not change one’s profession. For example, Luther emphasized more than once that workers should be satisfied with their work even when working conditions are bad. Words like these give the impression that a Christian should not change jobs.

However, because the divine vocation is accompanied by the guidance of the Spirit, who appeals to gifts and talents and to believers’ own responsibilities, the idea of *vocatio* does not preclude flexibility in work.

This approach suits today’s society better than the one-sided emphasis on *vocatio*. The idea of *vocatio* was less problematic in premodern society, in which fewer career opportunities existed than in today’s society, which is characterized by dynamism, mobility, and the need for flexibility. Both are true: God calls, and at the same time, believers must assume their responsibility under the guidance of the Spirit. The Spirit gives some individuals more than one skill or talent and sometimes a multitude of gifts. In such cases, Christians can change jobs without any problems so that they can use their skills and talents in different ways and areas. This approach also leaves more room for criticizing and counteracting alienating work than a one-sided accentuation of the *vocatio* idea. The Spirit also makes people understand their responsibility to improve working conditions; that is how he wants people to flourish in their work.

²⁸ E.g., Martin Luther, “Kirchenpostille, 1522,” in *WA*, 10/I:308 (on John 21:19–24).

²⁹ E.g., Calvin, *Institutes* 3.10.6.

The Spirit focuses on both creation and re-creation. Believers must orient themselves toward God's original idea for labor as well as to those things that contribute to the kingdom that comes in perfect glory. This future perspective is an important notion in Scripture: Christians are people of the future. Because their *vita activa* is connected to their humanity, their good works are works of the future as well. The works of the dead who died in the Lord will follow them (Rev 14:13). All believers, whether slave or free, will be rewarded for whatever good they have done (Eph 6:8). Their work will not be forgotten. However, this eschatological and pneumatological basis of daily work should not be exaggerated, because labor for livelihood remains necessary. In everyday life, changing jobs is not always possible.³⁰

Another aspect of the involvement of the Spirit is the sanctification of believers through their work. The Spirit makes believers grow in obedience to and dependence on God in and through their labor. This notion has always been important in the history of the church and theology. For instance, the early church emphasized that work offers an opportunity to strengthen virtue and encouraged labor as an exercise in moderation and diligence. The monastic tradition also emphasized the value of this exercise. "Idleness is the enemy of the soul," said Benedict of Nursia.³¹ Work is a kind of mental exercise. The Reformers also pointed to this notion. According to Luther, work teaches self-control.³² It can serve as a remedy for wrong desires in the same way that the body is trained to subject its desires to the mind through fasting.³³ Labor also helps in the practice of patience: "The faithful," said Calvin, "the more they labor in procuring a livelihood, with the greater advantage are they stimulated to repentance, and accustom themselves to the mortification of the flesh."³⁴ In this regard, Max Weber spoke about the Protestant work ethic as asceticism outside the monastery walls (*innerweltliche Askese*).³⁵

VII. Livelihood

The salvation of Christ brings restoration and renewal to every aspect of the Christian life. The believer's work is no longer subject to foreign powers

³⁰ Brock, *Christian Ethics*, 308.

³¹ *The Rule of Saint Benedict*, chapter 48, trans. Abbot Parry OSB (Leominster, Herefordshire: Gracewing, 1990), 77.

³² Martin Luther, "Ein Sermon von Ablass und Gnade, 1517," in *WA*, 1:244.

³³ Martin Luther, "Von der Freiheit eines Christenmenschen, 1520," in *WA*, 7:30.

³⁴ Calvin, *Genesis*, 1:176 (on Gen 3:19).

³⁵ Cf. Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Talcott Parsons (1958; repr., New York: Dover Publications, 2003), 154.

but portends the new age in Christ. However, working for one's own livelihood remains a necessity. The hardworking farmer should be the first to receive a share of the crops (2 Tim 2:6). The Lord Jesus himself was a carpenter (Mark 6:3) and spoke about all kinds of professions in his teachings. Paul was a tentmaker (Acts 18:3) and did not shy away from hard work (1 Cor 4:12; 2 Cor 6:5; 1 Thess 2:9). He earned a living so that he would not be a burden to anyone (1 Cor 9:6; 2 Cor 11:9) and admonished believers to roll up their sleeves (1 Thess 5:14; 2 Thess 3:6, 11). Whoever refuses to work is not allowed to eat (2 Thess 3:10).

Likewise, people who used to rob are ordered to stop robbing and start working, so that they can earn honest livings and help the poor (Eph 4:28). It does not matter what work they do, as long as they can give thanks to God with it and do not dishonor Christ's name. Christians should look after their own business and earn their own bread. Then they do not have to turn to anyone for support (1 Thess 4:11–12; 2 Thess 3:6–13).

The early church emphasized that simple work is not despicable, referring to the example of Jesus and the apostles. On the contrary, newcomers to the congregation had to earn their own living. If, however, they did not practice a profession, according to the *Didache*, the community of faith could deal with them as it saw fit. This probably means that they would then be employed by the community (*Did.* 12:3–5). The *Epistle of Barnabas* compares those who do not earn their daily livelihoods through their own efforts with birds that eat the prey of other animals. They rob other people's property in a lawless way. As they walk around innocently, they look out for someone they can greedily shake out (*Barn.* 10:4). A church order from the third century admonishes the faithful to be diligent in their work; they who are living lazy lives are not worthy of the Christian name.³⁶ Faithfulness and dedication in daily work are the most important criteria for the orthodox faith.

Augustine tells about people who withdraw from work, taking advantage of others and teaching laziness, while pretending to be guardians of the gospel. The church father preferred that monks who did not want to tire their hands should keep their mouths shut as well.³⁷ Hermits who isolate themselves for long periods of time for prayer must first gather their own food to get through their time of contemplation.³⁸ God feeds and clothes his people by means of their own hands. Only when they cannot work does

³⁶ *Didascalia* 13.

³⁷ Augustine, *De opere monachorum* 26.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 29.

he provide his care in other ways. Those who are able to work must not tempt God. Work is a gift from God, who gave it to us so that we can perform it.³⁹ Or, as Luther said, “although the believer trusts in the care of God, he does not expect a roast chicken to fly into his mouth. Just as birds are born to fly, man is born to work.”⁴⁰ This sustenance also refers to the care for one’s own circle: the life union of man and woman, the household, the faith community, the organization or association, the business, the nation, or any other community to which the individual belongs.

One problem in today’s society is that people’s desires are increasing. Today’s desires are tomorrow’s needs. Work follows that track. The gospel, however, warns sharply against working without limits to store up things for oneself (cf. Matt 6:19). People need to know when to stop. The unrestrained pursuit of needs will cause harm. One can set limits by paying attention to fundamental nonmaterial needs.⁴¹ This attention accords with Scripture. Jesus taught his disciples that they were not under the power of care (Matt 6:19–34). The same lesson is taught in the notion of the Sabbath, a day of remembrance of God’s care and a day in which care for the neighbor and creation are especially central. This thought of trusting in God and looking out for the other may also be experienced in a special way in the midst of the Christian congregation. This includes looking after those who are unable to work and therefore also missing the benefits of regular, mandatory activities.

VIII. *Evangelical Dimension*

The gospel commands Christians to consciously consider the well-being of their neighbors in their daily work. This commandment has priority. Well-being should not depend on the unintended consequences of economic self-interest that would supposedly arise from some “invisible hand.” The commandment in question is a necessary correction to what people are naturally inclined to do; it is, in Søren Kierkegaard’s words, a pick that wrenches open the lock of self-love.⁴² Jesus taught his disciples to pray, “Give *us* this day *our* daily bread” (Matt 6:11). Work for the good of the neighbor therefore implies cooperation. *Koinonia* is a promise not just for a

³⁹ Ibid., 35.

⁴⁰ Martin Luther, “Von den guten Werken,” in *WA*, 6:271–72; “Der 147. Psalm, Lauda Jerusalem, ausgelegt, 1532,” in *WA*, 31/I:437.

⁴¹ Volf, *Work in the Spirit*, 151–54.

⁴² Søren Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, ed. Howard and Edna Hong (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), 34.

church community but for every community where people work together.

A Christian is first and foremost a neighbor to those given to him: children, parents, and relatives (cf. Exod 20:12; Prov 31:15; 2 Cor 12:14; 1 Tim 5:4). Likewise, the community of faith is a neighbor to the needy in its midst. In the first Christian congregations, the work of the diaconate consisted of sharing and enjoying the results of daily work together. Everyone got as much as they needed (Acts 2:44–45; cf. 4:32). Paul did his work to help the poor (Acts 20:35) and admonished believers to do their work so that they could help the poor (Eph 4:28).

Furthermore, Christians are expected to be neighbors to anyone whom they encounter on their path, whoever this person may be and regardless of race or social affiliation. This encounter takes place with all kinds of people. This contrasts with ancient Israel, where charity was mainly centered on needy fellow citizens. Whoever worked the land had to consider widows and orphans, poor people and strangers, and Levites. Israelites were to follow YHWH in his care for the needy. Therefore, there were to be no poor among his people (Deut 15:4). Jesus pointed out what the prophets of ancient Israel had already prophesied: a disciple of the kingdom must be a neighbor to whomever he finds on his way (Luke 10:36–37). Work is primarily characterized by love for one's neighbor. Paul, in his address to the elders of Ephesus, stated that by "his hard work" he set an example for them in caring for the poor, "remembering the words of Jesus: 'It is more blessed to give than to receive'" (Acts 20:35). Luther said sharply,

He who does not work is in two ways a thief of his neighbor, namely by making someone else work for him (feeding on his blood and sweat) and by withholding from his neighbor what he owes him.⁴³

Daily work should be a service to one's neighbor and reflect God's care for his world. For an employer, this also means, among other things, that when recruiting workers, he has an eye for people living on the margins of society.

Meanwhile, work continues to be a valuable means of livelihood and the maintenance of communities and a tool for character building and the development of skills and talents. This dimension of labor as a tool is not mentioned in the gospel, which merely observes that work is necessary for sustenance. What the gospel does underscore, however, besides loving service to one's neighbor, is the restoration and renewal of work in Christ.

⁴³ Martin Luther, "Epistel am neuzehnten Sonntag nach Trinitatis," in *WA*, 22:322 (on Eph 4:22–28); "Von Kaufshandlung und Wucher, 1524," in *WA*, 15:302.

Work really only flourishes in Christ and through this reaches its destination. Seen from that perspective, the *vita activa* has perpetual value. This applies not only to those works that are done out of love for Jesus but also to every activity the Holy Spirit wants to use for the realization of his ends. Every good work is a building block in God's kingdom and has instrumental as well as independent value. It can be an entity that magnifies God. The standard and guideline for activity are therefore determined not only by the order of creation but also by the glorious new world to come.

In this loving service to God and the neighbor and the orientation of believers toward the coming kingdom, the community of faith plays an important role. It influences the character formation of believers and thereby the process of choosing a profession. In their midst, young people see examples of workers focused on the kingdom of God. Preaching, youth education, and personal encounters show how people in their daily work, at home or wherever, can be of service to people and society and responsibly take their places in God's good creation.

Conclusion

Theology emphasizes that no one can secure happiness in his temporary life through his work and that no one can through his good works guarantee a place for himself in the house of God. If God does not build the house, the builders labor in vain (Ps 127:1). At the same time, theology emphasizes the value of Christians' work for their neighbors and the environment. Works that are done out of love for Jesus are valuable and everlasting. Moreover, every work that fits the eternal kingdom of God has eternal value. Work is not only a matter of obedience to God's call but also of responsible and cheerful use of skills and talents under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Christians are willing to do what God wants with all their heart, as a "slave of Christ" (Eph 6:6), in their *vita activa* as in the rest of their lives. The community of faith plays an important role in the formation and equipment of Christians with regard to their work in whatever context.