

Sermon 27th August 2006

Work

When I mention the word work what is your reaction?

When we think of work, we usually think of paid work

Many people see work as a means to an end and the end is the finance material goods and services to provide a certain standard of living and lifestyle – if they won the lottery they would give up tomorrow

Many want to retire early and get on with things that really interest them

Most of my sixth form students see work as a necessary evil – relaxing (cotching) and doing as little as possible seems to be their idea of the good life

I think though that they will change their minds later in life – life without work of any soon becomes aimless and boring – we need goals and aims to channel are energies – we need activities where we can find a sense of purpose and achievement

This morning I am interested in developing a Christian view of work – looking at one or two scriptures and considering different theological attitudes towards work

Work is one aspect to life that Christians tend to seriously neglect – how many sermons have you heard on the subject of work?

That's worrying and strange because we spend at least one seventh of our lives in paid employment

So the first thing I want to think about is why Christians have so badly neglected the notion of work

The simple answer is that Biblical Christianity has been distorted by ideas that are alien to it

Ideas that mainly have come from Greek philosophy – especially from the philosopher Plato (b.427 BC)

Lots of Christians divide up life into sections – you hear it all the time

We have our spiritual lives and our non-spiritual or secular lives

The spiritual bits include prayer, church-activities, evangelism, worship, quiet times

The secular bits are everything else – cleaning the house, washing the car, making the dinner, and going to work

This way of dividing up life is really derived from ancient Greece

The Greeks divided up the world into two parts – known as a dualism

(1) Matter – the physical world – this was changeable, a place of death, decay and evil – a world of the chaotic – this included the human body

(2) Spirit – this was the world of beauty, truth and goodness; reason and rationality

The world of matter was really junk – it was the spiritual that counted

Work was undertaken in the world of matter and this led the Greeks to a very dim view of it

Work was a curse – a necessary evil - as far as possible they obtained slaves to do it for them

Augustine was one famous Church Father who has a massive influence on early Christian thought

Before he became a Christian Augustine was immersed in Greek thinking

And after he was converted , he still had deep rooted Greek ideas in his theology – he found it very difficult to escape from the cultural thinking of the time

And Augustine passed them on into large sections of mainstream Christian thought right up until this day

Like the Greeks, Augustine to divide up the world (as the Greek philosophers did) into what we would now call the spiritual and the secular bits

Augustine thought that the soul of a person was good but the body was part of the world of matter

Hence the soul needed saving but the body is sinful and weak and not very important

Augustine thought that our problem was human beings are stuck in evil and sinful physical bodies – and we need to escape from them – salvation is that escape

“The goal of spiritual life was to free the mind from the evil world of the body and the sense so that it could ascend to God”¹

If the material world and body is bad and the soul or spirit is good, then it follows that there are some activities less valuable than others

Augustine promoted a version of the Greek view of work

In his mind work was a necessary evil

¹ Pearcey N (2004), *Total Truth* p76.

To be a farmer or a baker or a soldier was to be involved with a world that is temporary and passing away

It was much more valuable to pursue a life of contemplation and prayer – to give oneself to the contemplation of eternal matters

In keeping with his stance, he thought that sex was sinful or at the very least base and shameful – it is to do with the body

It is no surprise then that medieval Christianity was very much organised around these principles

The really spiritual people became priests or monks or nuns devoting themselves to a life of prayer and meditation

All of these people had to commit themselves to celibacy in order to function in these roles - the physical and sinful world had to be renounced

It was not uncommon for monks to beat themselves and wear hair shirts to inflict pain on their bodies – remember the body was inherently sinful and needed to be suppressed

As you will be aware such ideas still deeply rooted in Christian thinking

There is a strong dualism that is deeply rooted in the minds of most evangelical Christians

Some people call it a divided life spirituality

It's seen in various ways today (I shall discuss 5 of them):

(1) As we've already said, it is seen in the division between our so-called spiritual activities and so-called secular ones

Prayer, reading the Bible, praise and church activities are seen often as more important than washing up or changing a baby's nappy

And you don't think in this way, then often your loyalty to Christ is questioned²

(2) It's seen in people talking about their secular jobs and the secular world

It's as if there are parts of our lives or the world that are unrelated to God or true spirituality

God isn't really interested in our work

Some call it the sacred/secular divide

² Keyes D, *Five Themes of L'Abri*, L'Abri Teaching Cassettes.

(3) It's seen in a hierarchy of importance in the church (I was raised on this thinking)

There is a declining dedication to God as one moves down the hierarchy

On the top are overseas missionaries – the really spiritual ones

Next are full-time church workers – pastors; evangelists, preachers

Elders

Deacons

People in caring professions – teachers, doctors, social workers

People in the arts, science, law, business

(4) It's also seen in what we perceive as spiritual and non-spiritual activities

Spirituality tends to be measured by how much of the 'world' we are separated from – the world is defined as the non-church bits to life- so really spiritual Christians don't do to the theatre, cinema, don't read novels or listen to certain types of music

Often this is how we keep score and identify the really committed Christians

It's also how we often measure our own spirituality³

(5) It's seen in the notion that the creation is only a platform – only a stage - where the real and spiritual activities can take place

We shouldn't get too committed to the creation as one day God will destroy the world and make a new earth – so now our thinking should always be heavenward

The Reformation

The heresy and error of dualism or divided life spirituality was identified and rejected by the leaders of the 16th Century Reformation – Martin Luther, John Calvin and Ulrich Zwingli

They are known as the Reformers because they wanted to reform the church and make it more Biblical – hence the term Reformed theology

They set about de-greasing the church – removing the effects of Greek philosophy

³ Keyes D, *The Christian Faith as a Worldview*, L'Abri Teaching Cassette.

Sadly much of their thinking was forgotten and large sections of Christian theology failed to be fundamentally changed

What did the Reformers say? How did they interpret the Bible differently (and I think correctly)?

They argued that there is no distinction between the matter and spirit

God made the world and pronounced that it was good

Adam and Eve were not put onto the earth to just do so-called spiritual things – like sing hymns and pray and have quiet times

If we look in Genesis 1: 26-29 we see that they were given instructions by God as to how they were to conduct themselves:

²⁶ Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, ^[b] and over all the creatures that move along the ground."

²⁷ So God created man in his own image,
in the image of God he created him;
male and female he created them.

²⁸ God blessed them and said to them, "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground."

²⁹ Then God said, "I give you every seed-bearing plant on the face of the whole earth and every tree that has fruit with seed in it. They will be yours for food. ³⁰ And to all the beasts of the earth and all the birds of the air and all the creatures that move on the ground—everything that has the breath of life in it—I give every green plant for food." And it was so.

These verses are known as the Creation Mandate

Adam and Eve and their descendants were commanded by God to:

(1) Rule over the earth v26

In other words they were to have dominion (AV) over the earth

They were called to image God by being his stewards and ruling the earth under his authority

They were to be kings and queens working under the great King

(2) They were to be fruitful v28 and increase in number, fill the earth and subdue it

So getting married, having sex union within marriage and bearing and raising children is all part of God's command to us

Now if we put those things together the human race has a big job on its hands

Under the authority and direction of God it needs to build communities

Engineers will be needed and builders and artists and business men and women and musicians and economists and scientists and homemakers and bakers and farmers

And to a greater or lesser extent all human beings will wear various hats in life – as father or mother as manager as preacher or as appreciators of music or art as housewife as DIYer

And in all these roles and activities in life we are provided with an opportunity to obey God and serve him and our fellow creatures

Now because the human race is fallen from God it doesn't mean that the Creation Mandate has changed

We are still called upon to have dominion over the earth and be fruitful and multiply

The effect of the Fall, is that the human race takes the gifts that God gives to fulfil the Mandate and uses them for self-fulfilment and self-aggrandisement rather than for the benefit of others

But God's creation is still good and He is the process of redeeming every part of it

There aren't some activities that he cares about and some that he doesn't – he is interested in all of life

Every aspect to life – our work – our creativity – our parenting – our gardening - provides an opportunity for obeying or disobeying God, for honouring or dishonouring Him – for submitting to his Lordship or not

Christ's Lordship doesn't only apply to the spiritual or sacred bits to our lives but to all of them

The Bible doesn't make distinctions between different areas of life – Augustine was wrong there is no sacred / secular divide

Nothing is neutral or irrelevant

God is in the business of restoring the creation to His original intention for it – it won't just be burnt up and destroyed – there's plenty of Biblical evidence of support this view

This world matters – salvation is not primarily about escaping from it

In fact the only secular thing is sin – sin is alien to this creation as God first made it

Obviously sinful activities cannot be subject to Christ's Lordship – they have to be forsaken

Everything else is spiritual – planned and instituted by God – work, family, creativity etc

The dividing line between good and evil sacred and secular doesn't run between different human activities unless one of them is actually sin⁴

So let's think a little more how work fits into this framework

(1) God is the prototype worker

In John 5 :17 Jesus said, "My Father is always at his work to this very day, and I too, am working"

So Jesus pointed to his Father as the great worker

He himself says that he works for the Father and he worked with the Father – and as we know Jesus is our pattern for true living⁵

As images of God we are called to reflect him in our work

Work is not a necessary evil – it is not a curse following the fall - it is part of what it means to be human – we are created to work

As with God, work does not demean us, rather work gives us dignity and purpose⁶

If we don't work we are denying something that is intrinsic to being truly human

(2) Work as service to God and His world

Like all the gifts that God gives work can be used in a right way or a wrong way

The work that we are called to do is service to others – for the good of society and the creation

Sadly one of the consequences of the fall is that we take work and turn it into an idol – something to serve our own desire of power or wealth or to define our identity

The whole notion of the term career is really the suggestion that the work we do is for our own satisfaction and pleasure

⁴ Ibid

⁵ Bingham G (1991), *All Things Are Yours*, p69.

⁶ Ibid

The Reformers and Puritans used the term vocation to describe our call to work – vocation carries with it the sense of being called to do some specific work where we serve others and the whole community

They tried to redeem the term vocation from its use by the Roman Catholic Church as being called to be a priest - a specifically religious calling

They wanted to stress that we can serve God and others in the multitude of jobs and professions that Christians are involved in

They also rejected the monastic life, stressing that as Jesus said we are called to in the world but not of the world (John 17:14ff)

They wanted to redeem the concept of work and stress that work is a sacred calling where we obey God and work to fulfil the Creation Mandate of having dominion over the world

They preached that the Christian life is not a summons to a life separated from the creation but a summons to serve in it

So we are not first and foremost in the workplace only to win souls (as some teach) but go into the workplace as the result of a divine summons to do so

Work is a major way in which we are to serve and love our neighbour

Seen in this way, there are no secular jobs for Christians – to suggest that there are implies that God is not interested in what we do in society

But it is through work that the hungry are fed, the naked clothed, the sick are healed; music is made, social justice is worked for, the environment is stewarded properly, inventions occur, the roads are swept, the bins emptied etc.

They sought to save Christians from a kind of schizophrenia – where what they did for the majority of the week had little or no relationship to their Christian faith

So William Tyndale (the Bible Translator and Reformer) could write (this actual statement was quoted in evidence against him at his trial and then burning):

“There is no work better than another to please God; to pour water, to wash dishes, to be a souter (cobbler), or an apostle, all is one, to wash dishes and to preach is all one, as touching the deed, to please God.”

So ordinary life is spiritual – the more we are what God intended us to be – and God intended for us to work, the more truly spiritual we are

The notion of calling should provoke all of God’s people to do their very best whatever their trade, job, occupation or career (Colossians 3:23).

As Martin Luther King once said, "If you are called to be a street-sweeper, you should sweep streets as Michelangelo painted or Beethoven composed music or Shakespeare

wrote poetry. You should sweep the streets so well that the host of heaven and earth will say, 'Here lived a great street-sweeper who did his job well.'"⁷

(3) Our work is part of a greater work

We often separate life out into segments: our marriage; our family life; our employment; our role in the church

But the concept of vocation doesn't work like this – it sees our lives as a whole – a life of service to God across various roles

A major motivation for work is that we work for the King – we are in His service

This transforms the mundane and boring into something noble and honourable

Whatever you do, do it to the glory of the Lord

Martin Luther said, "What you do in your house is worth as much as if you did it up in heaven for our Lord God.... We should accustom ourselves to think of our position and work as sacred and well-pleasing to God."

The concept vocation teaches us that all of us have a unique role to play in God's economy – he gives us a role and work which is assigned to no one else can do

All of our work is a strand of God's overall work in history – bring about his eternal purposes and plans

The general view of society's commentators is that there is no pattern or purpose to history

But the Bible doesn't share this view: it teaches that through all the seeming chaos and problems, God is in control of history guiding it to a climax

And along the way he gives roles to his people – their vocation – which are integral to the fulfilling of those purposes

We may not think that our lot in life is very important – but the way we keep score on what matters in life is often a reflection of our captivity to the values of those around us – the ultimate valuation of the value and contribution of a human life will be very different – and will be seen to all to be very different to what we think

So our lives are sub plots in a greater story⁸

Dick Keyes wrote:

"We are part of the overarching story that is the ongoing work of God in the world. It is as if the master story of God were a cable running from past to future. Our own life

⁷ <http://www.ivmdl.org/reflections.cfm?study=119>

⁸ Keyes D (1995), True Heroism in a World of Celebrity Counterfeits, p115

stories are strands in that cable. By the way we live, we can strengthen or weaken the cable.”

If one is a servant of God, everything one does is heroic and meaningful, if it done as part of the consecration of one’s life to God.⁹

The greatness of human activity or otherwise is determined by God Himself. The opinions of others will finally be of little consequence compared to God’s.¹⁰

Our society stresses equality not uniqueness

But stressing equality can’t avoid the feeling that all humans are of interchangeable and therefore expendable – someone else can do my job

But the idea of vocation stresses uniqueness – each one having a special role to fulfil in God’s economy

Work is therapeutic

God gives gifts and skills

World won’t be destroyed

26

Due to this model Augustine adopted the Greek view of work

Work has to do with matter – the body working with

Work – God is the worker – means of fulfilling the creation mandate – role of vocation and calling

⁹ Adopted from Ernest Becker quoted by Keyes ibid p111.

¹⁰ Keyes Ibid p112.

God gives talents and gifts creationally to carry out the creational mandate – we make gifts and work into idols

In the new creation we will work

Example of Jesus – the carpenter

Who is right about what it means to be human?

The Greeks envisioned an ideal humanity. Their ethereal sculptures depict a transcendent, spiritual model. But today many scientists view human beings as mere machines. And some believe we will be able to make machines with human-like intelligence in the near future.

The biblical view of humanity is different from both of these. For the writers of Scripture, to be human is to be in the image of God. Guided by this view, Randal Macaulay and Jerram Barrs discuss the nature of spiritual experience. As the pursuit of true spirituality takes us away from sinfulness, it moves us closer to what God intended us to be. When we are truly spiritual, we are fully human.

Macaulay and Barrs begin by stressing the centrality of Christ. Then they distinguish between self and the sinfulness of self, argue for using our minds in spiritual matters, and illuminate the many ways God guides us. Their chapter on the family discusses the vexed issue of authority. And they conclude with a look at the evidence, judgment, hope, joy and reward of faith.

In short, this book, now back in print due to ongoing demand, presents an integrated model for what human beings really are.