

# Principles for Transformation: Connecting Personal and Public Life

## Theology of Work

By Dr. Art Lindsley



There is a significant need to recover a biblical theology of work in our time. In the past there has been a failure of the evangelical church to address a theology of work. William Diehl says in his book *Christianity and Real Life*:

*I am now a sales manager for a major steel company. In the almost thirty years of my professional career, my church has never once suggested that there be any time of accounting of my on-the-job ministry to others.... There has never been an inquiry into the types of ethical decisions I must face... I never have been in a congregation where there was any type of public affirmation of a ministry in my career. In short, I must conclude that my church really doesn't have the least interest in whether or how I minister in my daily work.*

There are now a number of churches and organizations that are addressing this issue but they are still far too few. A short summary of the theology of work would include these topics:

1. Work is not a result of the Fall. We were all created to work. In Genesis 1:26-28 image bearers of God (male and female) are called to exercise dominion or rulership over the whole creation. Only God can create something out of nothing. We are to create something out of something. We are what Francis Schaeffer and J.R.R. Tolkien called sub-creators. We can take wood and make a table or a house. We can take metal and make a tool or musical instrument and so on. Dorothy Sayers argued that it is more true to say that we live to work than it is true to say that we work to live. She also maintained that it is more

true to say we play to work than it is true to say that we work to play. Too many live for the weekend (TGIF) or for vacation or retirement.

2. Work is not a result of the Fall, but it is made harder because of the Fall. Genesis 3:17 says that the ground is cursed because of the Fall into sin. The ground will yield thorns and thistles. There will be much blood, sweat, and tears in the context of work. However, redemption can impact our work.

3. Work is more than a place to make money to give to the church or a place to evangelize. It is certainly appropriate to give to the church, or when the appropriate situation presents itself to share the gospel, but these purposes are not the central reason to work. Work is valuable in itself.

4. The ministerial calling is not higher than other professions such as business, medicine, law, or carpentry. Jesus was a carpenter, or general contractor, for about eighteen years. It is estimated that he worked in this manner from age twelve or thirteen to “about thirty” according to Luke 3:23. God’s kingdom can be advanced from all valid professions. We are all “priests” called to offer spiritual sacrifices and proclaim his excellency in a world of darkness (1 Peter 2:5, 1 Peter 2:9-10).

5. Redemption extends to all of life including our work. In creation we were made to respond to God (personally) respond to each other (corporately), and respond to the creation (cosmically). The Fall impacts all three of these areas. Adam and Eve hide from God rather than walking with Him in Genesis 3:8 (personal), Adam blames Eve and Eve blames the serpent in Genesis 3:12-13 (corporate), and the ground is cursed in Genesis 3:17 (cosmic). Alienation impacts all three levels. Redemption influences every area the Fall impacts. Christ died for us, rose for us, reigns in power for us and prays for us according to Romans 8:34 (personal). When we accept Christ we are baptized into his body according to 1 Corinthians 12:13 (corporate). Redemption extends to the whole cosmos. Acts 3:21 speaks about the “restoration of all things”. Romans 8:19-21 indicates that the whole creation “will be liberated from its bondage” (cosmic). Finally, God will restore the whole creation through a new heaven and a new earth. There are two Greek words for “new”. “Neos” is totally new and “kainos” means renewed. Almost everywhere the Bible uses the word new (new birth, new self, new age, new creation, etc.) the word “kainos” is used. God will renew His creation. Al Wolters says “God doesn’t make junk and he doesn’t junk what He has made”. This means that our work can participate in the redemption of all of life. In fact, it is an important means of expressing that redemption.

6. There are indications that some of our work will be present in the new heavens and new earth. In Revelation 21: 24-26 it says twice that the kings of the earth will bring the “glory of the nations” into the new heavens and new earth. This seems to indicate that there is something to the unique cultural creativity of each nation that will be present for people to appreciate for all eternity. This makes us wonder what creative products will last forever.

7. We are called to glorify God in our work. 1 Corinthians 10:31 indicates that we are to give glory to him in how we eat and drink and surely in how we work. Our work is to be done for the Lord (Colossians 3:23). Work, whether in business, medicine, law, carpentry, construction, garbage collection,

or the arts can all be done to the glory of God and for our Lord. If our work is done well he may say "Well done my good and faithful servant" (Matthew 25:23).

8. What can pastors of people do? First, watch our language. Being a pastor is not a higher calling than being a carpenter. Second, find ways of acknowledging the validity of people who work in "secular" jobs in your congregation. Remember you can be a "minister" even in a government job (Romans 13:4). Finally, encourage creativity and entrepreneurship in your people. Hugh Welchel in his excellent book *How Then Should We Work* says "Unless Christians embrace the Biblical doctrine of work, they will remain ineffective... helpless to impact the culture around them for the glory of God and the furtherance of His kingdom."

9. Recovering a theology of work can encourage a flourishing society. Throughout the ages people have desired a path that leads to flourishing. When we work together with other people and serve customers giving them good products and services we increase the wellbeing of our society. We are to use our talents for the good of the kingdom- God's rule and reign on earth as well as in heaven (Matthew 25:14-30). The Bible encourages "shalom"- flourishing in every direction. The kind of peace desired is pictured in Micah 4:4. "And each of them will sit under his vine and under his fig tree with no one to make them afraid." This kind of ownership and enjoyment of the fruits of our labors is encouraged by scripture. The resulting state of flourishing brings glory to God and produces joy, peace, and security.