

T O W A R D
A T H E O L O G Y
O F W O R K

A CHALLENGE TO FIND AND DEFINE
MARKETPLACE CHRISTIANITY

AN ESSAY BY STUART MCGREGOR

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A work mate of mine looked at me in utter disbelief. “I feel like I have just been hit by a bus.” He said to me, his eyes glazed by shock as he was considering what his family was about to go through ten days before Christmas. “What am I supposed to do?”

He had just come out of a meeting with the management of our struggling company of which he had been a part of for 14 years. He was a good guy, keen as beans to learn the emerging technologies of the ever-changing industry of publishing as he had slowly watched his skills become more and more superfluous to new workflows. The computer was doing him out of a job. He had several times said to the management that he was wanting to learn more on the computers. But as there was a strictly demarcated team strategy in place he was confined to the mundane and repetitive task of working within one particular workflow for 6 months. He did not gain any new skills.

And then the news.

They had told him, “We can’t afford to have you employed as a junior computer operator here anymore. Why don’t you come back to us in 2 days and tell us how you might be best to fit in to our company.” They knew full well he couldn’t offer them a viable proposition.

This guy came out from the meeting and took me outside.

As we were outside talking, one of the chief shareholders who knew exactly what was going on, came out and pointed to the dent in his BMW’s passenger door. “Never give your car to your wife to drive,” he joked to my friend and I, “that;s gonna be expensive.” And off he went, leaving us completely bamboozled at how someone could be such an insensitive prick.

This man is the Youth Deacon at a well respected Baptist Church. At our Christmas function one week later he expressed to me how wonderful it was to be seeing the Spirit moving in his Church.

T O W A R D A T H E O L O G Y O F W O R K

In a sermon in November last year I recounted this frustration from my own life.

“I’ve been working in this new company for 5 months now and two weeks ago the cat scratched and hissed its way out of the bag that I was a Christian.

The conversation went as follows:

“Where did you get married? Was it in a church?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“Well I am I suppose what you would call religious . . .”

. . . silence . . .

“No you’re not.”

“Yes I am.”

“You are so not!”

“Um . . . yes I am.”

“How often do you go to church?”

“About once every two weeks.”

“You are so not.”

At this point I realized I had won a hollow victory. On one hand my disguise had worked! My hope was that at last they could see that a real Christian didn’t have to be a fanatic! And they would be drawn to me by my deeds and aura. And so when it would finally be revealed they would all shout “Oh my goodness he *is* a Christian, it *is* possible to believe that Jesus saves and *still* be real and normal! Hallelujah, fall on our knees and repent!”

On the other hand it is quite disconcerting to know that I actually had to spend 10 minutes convincing them that I was in fact a Christian. I don’t think the earth moved for them at all. In fact they just went back to work. I am not that different, well, I guess, I am not different.

You see at the end of my quest for authenticity and realness I have ended up nowhere. I have been concentrating so much on being real that I have stopped being myself. And it bothers me. It bothers me that it appears there is still no real victory or benefit to my faith.”

Both of these stories illustrate instances where the Gospel of Christ has failed at having any distinctive impact in professional life. They illustrate the creation of a stark dualism between work and church. Robert Banks calls it the “Gap between our Sunday faith and our Monday life.” I prefer to see it as a barrier rather than a gap probably because I like the idea of smashing

something down rather than filling it in. The barriers that are being put up between what many do during the week and what happens on Sunday are being reinforced by the beliefs that either there is nothing wrong with this dualism or a blatant denial of its existence. The issue is not that people are unaware of the need for them to be Christians in the workplace, it is that they don't know what it means. Simply it is too hard to work out a theology of work.

And rightly so. Often there are so many questions that we cannot find a scriptural or spiritual answer for. "Lord, should I use a 6mm or 7mm screw here?" In as much as God is devoid of any obvious presence in the swing of a hammer, it is easy to see how God can become quite irrelevant in many other work-related decisions. We can easily confine our spirituality to help people in our environment, but what about the rest of the company, city, state, country, world?

Seeking God in matters that do not directly affect anyone we know is where things are difficult. Christian Schumacher in his book "To Live and Work" asks "Are there such things as *more* or *less* Christian factory layouts, or planning systems, or systems for checking the quality of the product?" Well, what is a Christian perspective of Quality Control? When I was studying production engineering I was taught to "always make things as badly as you can", in other words the only economically viable quality is what will meet the QC criteria. If you either surpass it or fall short, you are being inefficient. Is this a Christian Ethic? If not why not? Isn't efficiency the key to a growing business? or is the key for growth excellence? Do we really need to build things that last forever?

Banks highlights the fact that what we do everyday is not reflected in the nature of the ministry of the Church. I couldn't agree more especially since the main thrust of Churches nowadays is to have a time with God that is absolutely distinct from any other day. Our Church services often promote the work of the Holy Spirit at certain times during the worship. In the face of the doctrine of the omnipresence of God, people seem to believe they are entering into God's presence at church or worse still, during a song time. Our services are so "spiritual" that they make the rest of the week look mundane. On paper the policy of Churches would say otherwise, but in practice, there is a definite sense of God is present at Church but not at work.

Many Churches imply (again not on paper or in policy but in practice) that full time Christian ministry is more in accordance with Christian virtue than working in "the world". William Diehl is quite scathing of this in his

book “Ministry in Daily Life” where he sees this as an amplified legacy from the days when Church was normative in social life and sending missionaries out was what the church did. What was a reasonable and wonderful passion is now a seditious form of apathy that is hampering spiritual growth in churches that are existing in a survival mode yet still supporting ministry outside of the church. Many have fallen into the trap of believing the mission field is not in their workplace.

Diehl also questions the sermon from the pulpit that asks “How much time do we give to God?” He expresses the guilt that is often felt by people when the pastor accuses them of only spending 1.5% of the hours a week with God. This kind of approach reinforces the false dicotomy between Church worship and the rest of our lives.

Robert Innes in his symposium on “God at Work” suggests there may be too much emphasis on God’s Sovereignty giving rise to these antitheses: God and World, Heaven and Earth, Soul and Body, Church and Work. In other words these antitheses are actually a result of a hyper-spiritualising God. In an attempt to gain spiritual experiences many have confined God to working in ministries that are affiliated directly with the Church and extracted him out of any direct work within the world (though not on paper or in policy). So is there any ministry in the workplace? How damning to end up with the result that people feel like lesser christians because they are not in Christian ministry.

S O W H A T O F A T H E O L O G Y O F W O R K ?

It is obvious that most people believe in a sort of spirituality of work even if it is simply to provide financial support. But it is usually ill defined and when pressed, hastily extracted from scripture by looking up the word “work” in a concordance. It is very rarely preached from the pulpit as William Diehl attests to, since the clergy don’t necessarily have an automatic understanding of the diversity of jobs within a congregation. It is quite possible that they don’t feel qualified to because they are usually in full-time Christian Ministry.

Some more elaborate attempts at developing a theology of work seem to fall flat. Schumacher sees work as mirroring the work of the cross. On the cross a transformation takes place which is comparable to the transformation of dough becoming bread. Eh? I deliberately didn’t finish his book, not because he didn’t give any good advice about being a Christian in the workplace, he did in fact have a lot to offer on management and employment ethics.

The problem was that his advice was just contemporary new-management philosophies bolstered obscurely with theological themes. For example:

. . . studies of airline pilots have shown that automatic systems which fly the aircraft, leaving the pilot to monitor in case something goes wrong, are demotivating and error-prone; while systems which automatically monitor deviations from normal but leave the pilot to fly the aeroplane manually are safer and give job satisfaction. . .

This alone is enough to convince me that human vs automation needs to be thought through but he spoils it.

“To sum up, the theology of the Eucharist draws attention to the need to design technology so that human beings have direct personal contact with the key parts of the work process and remain firmly in control of it.”

What? This is hyper-spiritualising and demonstrates clearly the difficulty facing anyone who is trying to develop a theology of work. Most attempts I have read are just rude throw togethers.

Generally Genesis 2:15 is given as being the theological basis for work. That God put the man in the garden to look after it. Some find in this a Biblical mandate by God that humans are created for work. Well ok, but did we really need to find it? It’s not like we have much of a choice. I don’t think that we need to find any more of a scriptural basis for us to work than for us to digest food.

But, for those who need it there are plenty of Biblical exhortations that build up a scriptural case for work where it is divinely instituted and is fundamental to the day to day human experience of life. It is just what we do.

While we are talking about Genesis, God worked 6 days and rested on the 7th. This of course has been adopted as an example and commandment with regard to how much human’s should work. But we have the institution of the 40hour week and the two day weekend. Are we now just down right lazy? I haven’t heard any people use Genesis as an argument for working 6 days but plenty who want Sundays off.

The bible does warn against laziness and idleness. But I wouldn’t quite go to the extent of Randle Manwarring’s declaration “Idleness is a major sin . . . it certainly leads to other sins — Satan finds work for idle hands and robs

God of the service that is due to him.” He is correct but overstated because there is a fine line between idleness and rest. Was God idle on the seventh day? How do we define rest?

Martin Luther’s sees rest as a protection from the idolatry of work and actually a high form of worship to God. This tackles head on the problem of whether we work to live or do we live to work? I suggest Luther would answer that we work *and* live.

Luther sees work (not specific vocation in this case) as a calling. He ascribes to work three stations. **Family** (extended), **Political** and **Secular authority, Church and Ministry** (after the pattern of the Trinity, which is yet another uncomfortable typology). These orders are God’s way of assuring a minimum amount of peace in the world. Without these society would disintegrate, in fact he seems to actually go so far as to say that even the evil manifestations in these stations are still ultimately controlled by God to stop total social breakdown. “Secular social preservation is a mask behind which God hides.”

He exhorts celebrating each particular station as being an honour and a decoration from God because these are the orders through which God will deal with humanity until the end. They are not to be treated lightly by trading them in to flee to a monastery. Luther’s dim view of monasticism is clear. He can’t see how that duality of spiritual living and worldly living is at all useful.

Considering the high profile that the Reformers placed on saved by Grace not by Works, we need to define a Christian work ethic. Is it encapsulated in a demonstration of our competence? Will this not result in a works oriented approach to our job? Is our best work actually our most spiritual?

The problem with our best work is that there is no such thing as a pure motive. I would often excel at my work because I knew there would be accolades of praise at the end of it. Self interest plays a huge part in my competence. I don’t want to fail, I want to be better than so and so, oh, I am better than so and so. Competitiveness is the cornerstone of the free market that we trade in. Self Interest is the stuff it is built out of. This is reflected by Adam Smith who is reputed to be the founder of modern economics.

It is not from the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer or the baker that we expect our dinner but for their regard to their own interest. We address ourselves not to their humanity but to their self-love. . .

T O W A R D A T H E O L O G Y O F W O R K

We have in the last two centuries witnessed a complete overturning of social responsibility. We have divorced the social concern from our livelihood. We are competitive in our business dealings and the Darwinian principles of survival of the fittest are supremely evident. Companies and individuals are being crushed left right and centre as the more powerful undercut and outperform their competitors. We often hear in the pulpits the call for radical counter culturalism like Jesus, but very few know what that means in the commercial context.

In light of this, Monastic life (missionary service? full time Christian work?) ought not to be considered as *counter-cultural* as many think, rather it is to be considered *ex-cultural*. The difference is clear. You can only be counter-cultural within a culture. This is the challenge to the Christian workforce. How do we run our companies with Christian principles? Even greater what are Christian principles? Maybe monasticism is the easy way out.

B U T T H E R E M A Y B E T H E B E G I N N I N G S O F A S O L U T I O N

Luther exhorts us all to subscribe ourselves to the priesthood of all believers where we find our responsibility to exercise our faith at work. Whether we like it or not, we are representatives of God in the workplace. Period. It seems strange that we pray for revival in our churches when perhaps we should be looking for it at work . . .

And this is the crux. There are two forces at work here. What God expects from us (or what we think God expects from us) as Christians, and what work expects from us as employees. We need to tease out which is which.

It is not enough for us to just be good at our jobs, because there are too many questions about motive. It is not enough to consider that our work is only fundraising because it belittles all the people contact we have. It is not good enough for us to be silent witnesses because we are being foolishly arrogant to think the light shines out of our butts.

William Diehl I think has brought some very useful insights into how this issue can be addressed. His primary focus is to find out what each other in the congregation do and talk about it in regular groups. Bring work to church! This will empower people to grapple with ethical dilemmas within Christian parameters and provide a sounding board.

I didn't want to do anything else in this presentation other than demonstrate that this is an area that still needs a lot of thought. I personally

believe that it is fundamental for the church to formulate an applied theology of work in order to retain many of the masses of those who drop out of Church. It is of utmost pastoral importance to know how to bring God into peoples work.

In our churches we must smash the barrier between Sunday night and Monday morning. We need to discard implied dualisms of “living out there in the world” where it seems that God has no place and being in the presence of God at church. We need to let God reside on earth with us, we need to learn spiritual experience within the workplace.

I finish with a quote from George McLeod from Iona community:

I simply argue that the cross be raised again at the centre of the marketplace as well as on the steeple of a Church. I am recovering the claim that Jesus was not crucified in a cathedral between two candles but on a cross between two thieves; on the town garbage heap; at a crossroad so cosmopolitan that they had to write his title in Hebrew, in Latin and in Greek . . . at the kind of place where cynics talk smut and thieves curse, and soldiers gamble. Because that's where he died. And that is what he died about. And that is where churchmen ought to be and what churchmen should be about.