Work in the Spirit

This post offers some initial reflection on the contributions of Miroslav Volf. He identifies the wide-ranging significance and implications of work, declaring it is “the basis of individual human life and all human history.” Volf seeks to develop a broad framework for a theological and ethical discussion of work.

In his book, *Work in the Spirit: Toward a Theology of Work*, Volf offers a comprehensive definition of work: “Work is honest, purposeful, and methodologically specified social activity whose primary goal is the creation of products or states of affairs that can satisfy the needs of working individuals or their co-creatures, or (if primarily an end in itself) activity that is necessary in order for acting individuals to satisfy their needs apart from the need for the activity itself.” Believing that economic systems should follow the dictates of theological reflection, he suggests three normative principles by which economic systems should be judged: freedom of individuals, satisfaction of the basic needs of all people, and protection of nature from irreparable damage.

The Crisis of Work. Exploring the “problem of work,” Volf outlines the ways in which current world economic systems are not meeting these criteria. He sees a worldwide crisis manifesting itself in negative attitudes toward work. On the one hand technology has transformed people from crafters to machine workers to machine overseers. The progression obviously has certain economic benefits. On the other hand no society, regardless of its relative industrial progress, has completely solved such problems as child labor, unemployment, discrimination, exploitation, and pollution. Moreover, market forces and corporate decisions beyond the control of rank-and-file laborers alienate them from their jobs and each other.

God’s New Creation. Turning to a theology of work which reflects upon the nature and consequences of human work, Volf explores the “ultimate significance of work” within the biblical and theological vision of God’s “new creation.” “Christian life is life in the Spirit of the new creation
or it is not Christian at all. And the Spirit of God should determine the whole life, spiritual as well as secular, of a Christian. Christian work must, therefore, be done under the inspiration of the Spirit and in the light of the coming new creation.” Such a theology of work is normative since it is about what human beings should desire their work to be. “What people desire is objectively desirable only when it corresponds to what the loving and just God desires for them as God’s creatures. And God desires the new creation for them. New creation is the end of all God’s purposes with the universe, and, as such, either explicates or implicitly is the necessary criterion of all human action that can be considered good.” Thus a theological interpretation of work is valid only if it facilitates the transformation of work toward the coming new creation which will bring God, human beings, and the nonhuman creation into “shalomic” harmony.

The Role of the Holy Spirit. Such a theology of human work rests in an understanding of God’s gifting humanity with clear purpose and a variety of abilities (charisms) to enable the fulfillment of that purpose. And at the heart of such a vision is the Holy Spirit. “The Spirit of God calls, endows, and empowers Christians to work in their various vocations. The charismatic nature of all Christian activity is the theological basis for a pneumatological understanding of work.” When the work of human beings exhibits commitment to the new creation (what Paul calls the “fruit of the Spirit”) then the Spirit is working in and through them. For Volf, the whole Christian life is a life of cooperation with God through the presence and activity of the Spirit. “As Christians do their mundane work, the Spirit enables them to cooperate with God in the kingdom of God that ‘completes creation and renews heaven and earth.’”

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. How would you define “work”? What catches your attention in Volf’s definition?
2. How well do you see current economic systems fulfilling Volf’s three criteria? Are there other criteria you would add?
3. In what way does the concept of “God’s new creation” provide a valid framework for a theology of work?
4. How does thinking of work in terms of the “fruit of the Spirit” impact the role and importance of work?
5. Why should Christians seek to develop a theology of work?