

Redeeming Work: Living Wholly within God's Reign: "A Tale of Two Ends"

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Over the next few months the Center Blog will share the presentations of Dr. Phil Kenneson in the 2016 missional church convocation held in the Chicago area on the topic of "Redeeming Work."

To begin the discussion, we will seek to accomplish two things. First, we want to explore together some of the most fundamental ways people are formed to think of work in our culture. What are the most pervasive assumptions people have internalized about work, in many cases from an early age? How do those assumptions shape their choices about and experience of work? Second, we want to rehearse briefly the story of God's work, God's mission in the world, and how God has called us as the people of God to be part of that work.

A theology of work is not something that is usually focused on. At issue is how might, how should Christians think about work? The few times I remember the topic coming up in a congregational setting was around how to be a Christian *at* work, how to be a good employee working for excellence, or how to witness at the water fountain. Now there is a place for those kinds of discussions. But what has bothered me is, how do Christians think about the actual work? Do we have a way of thinking about work that is any different than anyone else?

A Theology of Work. In the church I grew up in, we were told very clearly that the way the church thinks about sex is very different than the way the world thinks about it. There were other things that we had to be clear that we thought different about. But nothing was said about work. So the assumption seems to have been that Christians don't think any differently about the actual work. The way American culture thinks about work must be just fine. So a lot of people within our congregations have the default view of our culture about work.

If Christians are called to have a peculiar or a specific view of work that actually flows from our story of what we think God does in the world, what would it be? The greatest number of our waking hours are engaged in some sort of work. How are those hours integrated into Christian discipleship, into God's mission in the world? If we do not consciously work out a distinct theology of work, we are destined to live hopelessly fragmented lives. In church on Sunday we will have a particular vision of the world, while during the week another vision will shape our lives.

Two Different Views of Work. We are going to try and tease out two different views of work. On the one hand, the "normal" or default view consists of the deep, unspoken assumptions that our culture gives us about work. We have internalized deep assumptions about work, some spoken, some more subtle than others: What is work? How does it fit into our lives? What is good work? How is work bound up with our identities? Just by breathing the cultural air, most of us have this "normal" view. It influences our imaginations and forms the horizon within which we experience work.

For example, many people have been shaped to view work as a necessary evil. The necessary part is obvious: work pays the bills and takes care of our families. But the second part is also true. For

many people, there is something distasteful about work. They only do it because they have to. For many the idea of non-work is preferable. For example, dreams of early retirement or winning the lottery.

On the other hand is the “kingdom” view of work.” Jesus announced a new thing, the reign or kingdom of God which was breaking in by means of Jesus’ person, message, and ministry. Thus we pray, “Your kingdom come, your will be done.” What is the role of work within God’s kingdom? How might we talk about that? What is the story Christians have to tell about work? How are the hours we spend at work integrated into Christian discipleship, into God’s mission in the world?

I think Scripture is trying to tell a different story than the normal view of work. One word we might use is that work is a privilege, a gift. At the heart of the Christian story we tell work is a gift given to us by God. All too often in the popular Christian imagination, a particular story is told: people are seen as sitting around the Garden of Eden relaxing and enjoying themselves, but when they disobey God, God says, “Get to work.” But this is not the way the story goes at all. One of the most amazing and un-reflected upon points is that God created a world that is open to our work. I can imagine a God who created a world that is complete and self-sustaining. But the way God created the world, work is part of God’s design. Adam and Eve had good work to do before they disobeyed. Rather than punishment, work is a part of God’s good design. It is true that after they disobeyed God the earth became more resistant to their work and labor became more painful. The curse is not work itself, but that some forms of work would become more difficult, more painful, more toilsome. So work is good in God’s original design, a privilege and a gift, a call to participate in God’s ongoing creation.

“Normal” View of Work. (Listed below are some of the common assumptions about how work functions in our lives that were solicited from convocation participants and then discussed together)

1. Work is a necessary evil which pays the bills and supports our families.
2. Work is what you do for pay, it is “gainful” employment where money changes hands.
3. TGIF: we reward ourselves for work during the week by the leisure and fun things of the weekend. “I get to be who I really am during the weekend.”
4. Hard work leads to success. If you work hard and play by the rules, you will succeed; thus, don’t be afraid of hard work.
5. Work is a marker of identity. In social situations, the first thing people want to know after they know your name is “What do you do?” This is code for “what do you do for pay?” because our assumption is that your work or occupation is the key that unlocks your identity. If you don’t do work for pay, then who are you? This assumption has implications for the unemployed, the retired, and stay-at-home parents. You are what you do for pay.
6. Different kinds of work have different value and status. People are all too often respected and treated according to the kind of work they do. Higher status is not necessarily tied to compensation, since plumbers may make more than professors, but culture often regards the social status of the former as lower than that of the latter.
7. Time is money. The more work you do the more money you should make. The more time it takes, the more you should be worth. Thus vacations are frowned upon as money wasted.
8. Instrumental: work is a means to an end. This end is normally understood in financial terms: the money we earn from work pays our bills and keeps the economy going. Many people feel

that their work doesn't contribute to the common good. World says don't worry about that, it sends your kids to college. What makes a better job better is better pay.

9. Competition. Many occupations are adversarial: my job is to get ahead of others, to destroy the competition. In some settings competition can be toxic. How can I cooperate with you if we are competing for the same promotion?

Kingdom View of Work. (Listed below are some possible alternative assumptions about work derived from our understanding of God's work in the world that were solicited from convocation participants and then discussed together)

1. Work is a privilege and gift which enables humans to participate in and contribute to God's ongoing creative and redemptive activity in the world.
2. Work is related to issues of justice and fair play. All people are to receive fair compensation for their efforts. The kingdom view raises issues related to the current inequality of wealth and access to work, as well as concerns of race, ethnicity, and gender. Also brings up how resources are to be shared with children and others unable to work.
3. Forced labor is viewed as wrong. The focus is on a living wage for all people rather than what the market will bear.
4. Contributing to the greater good. Most people would like to be engaged in the kind of work that contributes to the common good. What is the church's role and responsibility to create this kind of work? Is there enough good work to go around? Part of what is redeeming about work is not just full employment but good work.
5. Social relationships. A great part of what people value about work is the opportunity to interact with other, to form friendships that enhance their personal and corporate lives.
6. Kingdom work would have boundaries, we don't force people to work for 30 cents an hour and don't put children to work in horrid conditions.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. What do you think is involved in a "theology of work"? Why is it important to develop such a theology?
2. Can you recall a time when work was discussed within your congregation? What assumptions about work were expressed?
3. What difference does it make to view work as part of God's design rather than as a punishment for disobedience?
4. As you look at the assumptions expressed under a "normal" view of work, what catches your attention? What would you add to the list?
5. As you look at the assumptions under a "kingdom" view of work, what catches your attention? What would you add to the list?