

## Voices for Living Christian Ethics



### God's *Oikonomia* (Economy) and Ours

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Does the Christian faith provide any wisdom concerning work? Scripture offers significant reminders that must be part of any reflection on work within God's *oikonomia* (God's "plan" in *Ephesians 1:9-10*).

We must remember, first, that *God works*. That might seem a trivial point, but the Bible actually presents a picture of God at odds with the broader environment in which the Scriptures were produced. From God the gardener (*Genesis 2:8*), to God the architect and builder of a lasting city (*Hebrews 11:10; 13:14*), the Bible links God with work. Above all, Paul uses the vocabulary of work when speaking of Christ's resurrection—the measure of God's power, work, strength, and might (*Ephesians 1:19-20*). If the Good Creator of the good creation works, there must be something good about work.

God works. This affirmation leads to a second consideration: *God wills work*. This might also seem obvious, but it was up to Martin Luther and John Calvin to broaden the medieval sense of "vocation" from the "religious" realm of priests and nuns to include the world of the craftsman and milkmaid and thus establish the foundations for what we call the "Protestant work ethic."

The Reformers would be the first, though, to insist that this broader view of "vocation" is a biblical emphasis. In *Ephesians 2:10*, for example, Paul describes believers as those "created in Christ Jesus for the purpose of good works . . . that we should walk in them." With the phrase "good works," Paul anticipates his discussion of the "walk worthy of the calling" (4:1). Nestled within *Ephesians 4-6* is Paul's admonition that each should "work with his hands what is good" (4:28). Paul presents godly work as a response to God's calling in the arena of everyday life!

God works. God wills work. Such affirmations must be appreciated. Recall, though, that rebellion against God introduces a dynamic such that work can now be an arena of frustration and futility. Can God's work of redemption make any difference for our work? Because of God's redemptive work in Christ, we affirm that *God wills work in keeping with God's will*.

Here we go from preachin' to meddlin'. Some assume that market mechanisms alone are sufficient to regulate work-related issues. Even some Christians accept this understanding and distinguish "spiritual matters" from work-related concerns.

Paul's account of life in Christ, however, refuses such a mindset. In *Ephesians 2:10*, Paul links participation in the new creation ("created in Christ Jesus") to the way of life God intended from the beginning ("good works which God prepared beforehand"). God created us to share in God's purpose for creation; such included work (*Genesis 1:26-28; 2:15*). God's redemptive work in Christ makes possible fulfillment of that purpose, including work in keeping with God's will.

Paul provides a glimpse into what that will include in his call for every believer to "work with his hands what is good, in order that he might have something to give to the one who is in need" (4:28). That admonition is part of Paul's reflection on a vision of the prophet Zechariah (*Ephesians 4:25* quotes *Zechariah 8:16*), a vision in which Zechariah depicts the renewed people of God as enjoying peace and play, fellowship and feasting, worship *and* work (*Zechariah 8:7-19*), and all this as witness to the nations of God's mercy (8:20-23). Paul

interweaves features of Zechariah's vision into his account of new life in Christ (*Ephesians 4:25-5:2*).

How might this vision illuminate God's will for work? First, in both *Zechariah* and *Ephesians*, work is simply one expression of God's work of renewal. God wills work, but God wills more than work, and work in keeping with God's will cannot be the all-consuming commitment that masks nervous efforts to ward off scarcity.

Confidence in God's abundance explains Paul's rationale for work: "so that he may have something to give to the one who is in need." That is *not* why most of us say we work. We work to pay bills, feed our families, etc. But Paul insists that work also be a means by which God's grace finds expression through generosity. Work that reflects the will of God trusts in God's provision so that work no longer dominates our lives but instead becomes a channel of God's abundance in a world of need.

Christians are accustomed to calls for generosity. Paul's admonition, however, might provide a specific challenge for Christians who have others in their employ. Do Christian employers dare trust in God's abundance to the point where they are not only generous in giving, but are willing to pay employees to the point where they can also work and worship, enjoy peace and play, fellowship and feasting, *and* themselves be generous? Americans put in more time at work than did medieval peasants. Executive compensation is at an all-time high in the United States, yet wages for average workers continue to decline while buying power weakens.

We go to meddlin' when we insist that imbalance in wealth distribution in the United States is an affront to God. We should remember, though, that such disparity brought God's judgment against Israel (*Zechariah 7:8-14*). If Paul describes new life in Christ in terms drawn from Zechariah's depiction of God's renewal of a disciplined people (*Zechariah 8*), it would be ironic for us to ignore what required that discipline in the first place (*Zechariah 7*). It would be more than ironic—it would be a denial of the grace of God that follows discipline with renewal.

God works. God wills work. But God also wills work in keeping with God's will. If we have gone to meddlin' here, it is meddlin' of the type that T. B. Maston himself so often practiced.