

50/95 Theology of Work

(A report from a committee appointed under resolution 50/95.)

Background

1. Resolution 50/95 of the Synod of the Diocese of Sydney states the following principle -
 "This Synod recognises, encourages and supports the roles of Godly men and women in their everyday work vocation - as distinct from ordained or full-time ministry - and affirms its belief that such work of service in and to the world, done in the name of the Lord Jesus and by God's enabling, is true and laudable service rendered to God Himself by those whose vocation and ministry it is, and is no less acceptable to Him than the Ministry of the Word."
2. By the same resolution a committee comprising the following persons was appointed to consider and report to the Synod an articulation of the Reformed and biblical theology of work -
 Dr R White, Miss A Watson, Bishop P Barnett, Canon R C Forsyth, the Rev Dr W Lawton, Dr S Judd, Mr W Shields and Mr I Miller.
3. The committee was requested to report in 1996 - extensions were granted to this timing until the 1999 Synod.
4. Due to other commitments, Canon Forsyth, Dr W Lawton and Bishop Barnett retired from the committee during its considerations.
5. The committee met on several occasions to discuss and complete its report. During this process, the committee noted that the Diocesan Doctrine Commission was working in this area also and considered that it would be of value to have that report available for this report.
6. At the request of the committee, Bishop D Robinson provided the following articulation as the committee awaited a report from the Doctrine Commission on this topic. [The Doctrine Commission's report was received by the Synod in 1998 and is published on pages 476 to 481 inclusive of the 1999 Year Book.] The committee wishes to express its deep and sincere thanks to Bishop Robinson for his thought and work which is set out in paragraphs 9 to 24 of this report.

The Reformed and Biblical Theology of Work

7. The principle stated in resolution 50/95, being the principle stated in paragraph 1 of this report is, in effect, that everyday work vocation - as distinct from ordained or full-time ministry - is true and laudable and no less acceptable to God than the ministry of the Word. Is this true? Or is "gospel work" an activity and a work which should be elevated over all else?
8. This report responds to the question by providing a biblical articulation of the theology of work.

Work in the Order of Creation

9. God the creator has given to man the honour of having dominion over the created order, the word of God's hand (Psalm 8). Both his dominion over the animals and his right to "every herb yielding seed" for his food (Genesis 1.28f) imply the necessity, imposed by God, that he work for his living.
10. Of the sons of Adam, "Abel was a keeper of sheep, but Cain was a tiller of the ground" (Genesis 4.2). The necessity to work was there from the beginning, but was accentuated after the fall and became an arduous and frustrating toil- "in the sweat of your brow you shall eat bread, until you return to the ground" (Genesis 3.19). So, although work was not in itself an evil, but essential and indeed beneficial, it was also wearisome, and hastened man's physical dissolution; it held no hope beyond death, for the fruit of the tree of life had been denied to disobedient Adam. This view of work and labour is forcefully elaborated in the Book of Ecclesiastes.
11. The Old Testament assumes that all men engage in day-long work- "Man goes forth to his work and to his labour until the evening" (Psalm 104.23) - an occupation and commitment reflected in the parabolic saying of Jesus in John 9.4 that "we must work ... while it is day, for the night comes when no one can work".
12. This principle of daily work to sustain physical life is explicitly embodied in the fourth commandment of the Decalogue- "Six days you shall labour and do all your work" (Exodus 20.9 and often repeated; cf Luke 13-14). But the same law of Moses shows that work is not the object of man's existence nor is it to consume all his energies or time. The fourth commandment sanctifies a Sabbath, a day for the LORD, thereby calling man to desist from his work in order to engage in the "rest" of God- no doubt to contemplate the good works of God and to enjoy the fruits of his own hands. Isaiah 58.13 describes the "delightful" use of the LORD'S Sabbath. This suggests that man was to find his ultimate satisfaction, and indeed his true end, not in his work but in rest from his work, just as God rested from his work and sanctified the rest day accordingly. (Hebrews 4.10 draws a spiritual lesson from this, as does Revelation 14.13.) Work is not unlimited, and is not to absorb all our interest or energies. Its fruits are to be enjoyed, and our relation to God our creator expressed therein.

13. The primary purpose of work is to sustain one's life, and the life of one's dependents. St Paul upholds the principle in 1 Thessalonians 4:11f- "aspire ... to work with your hands ... so that you may ... be dependent on nobody". The Book of Proverbs commends the diligent workers man and woman, and condemns the idle and the sluggard. Some who have acquired wealth may not need to work, or, more likely, the nature of their work will change. There are perils in idleness and self-indulgence, as Jesus taught (see Luke 12:16ff- "the rich fool"). The diligent worker not only supports himself, but has wherewith to support others in need. In the community of Israel these "others" included the priests and levites who represented the whole people in religious service (Deuteronomy 18:1-4). St Paul invokes this precedent or sanction when he quotes the Lord Jesus as having ordained that those who proclaim the gospel should get their living by the gospel; he reminds his readers that "those who serve at the altar share in the sacrificial offering", provided, of course, by the worshippers (1 Corinthians 9:13ff). Paul's general principle is that the beneficiaries of spiritual benefits should minister to their benefactors from their material resources (Romans 15:25; 1 Corinthians 9:11), and specifically, "let him who is taught the word share all good things with him who teaches" (Galatians 6:6).

14. However, teachers and apostles were only a very small proportion of the membership of the Christian communities or congregations, and it is interesting to note that St Paul himself, although he recognised the right of an apostle to "live by the gospel", refrained from making any claim on those to whom he preached the gospel at Corinth (1 Corinthians 9:12) and Ephesus (Acts 20:33), although he gratefully accepted support from churches already established (Philippians 4:15ff) to give him more freedom to preach elsewhere. But gospel preaching is not, in itself, incompatible with "labour and toil", even "night and day" as was demonstrated by Paul at Thessalonika (1 Thessalonians 2:9). Paul was, by training, a "tent maker" (leatherworker).

15. The principle, clearly urged in the law and the prophets, of assisting the poor from one's means (the fruit of one's labour) is expressly endorsed under the gospel. "Anyone (who) has this world's goods and sees his brother in need" must share with him; he must not "close his heart against him" (1 John 3:17). This is an expression of love which is of God, and which is to characterise the conduct of the children of God towards each other. In Ephesians 4:28, the converted thief is to "labour, doing honest work with his hands, so that he may be able to give to those in need". Working with one's hands may also be linked with *philadelphia*, love for the brethren, in 1 Thessalonians 4:11ff.

Variety of Work

16. Work with one's hands, manual labour, no doubt has been and still is the lot of the vast majority of mankind. The modern socialist movement has tended to monopolise the term "worker" in favour of manual labourers. However, work in the Bible is a larger concept than this, although there is a certain special dignity in working with one's hands which derives from the picture of the created world itself being the work of God's hands. So Isaiah 66:2- "All these things my hand has made, and so all these things are mine, says the LORD". The firmament proclaims God's handiwork (Psalm 19:1 cf Psalm 8:3). Moreover, God had given man dominion over the work of his hands (Psalm 8:6) so there is a sense in which all that man does under that divine mandate is the work of God's hands. This sense may be reflected in the prayer which concludes Psalm 90 where the whole of man's life comes under the light of God's eternity -

Let thy work be manifest to thy servants,
and thy glorious power to their children.
Let the favour of the Lord our God be upon us,
and establish thou the work of our hands upon us,
yea, the work of our hands establish thou it.

17. The Psalmist is surely not thinking here only of manual labour in the strict sense. The Israelite rightly sought God's blessing on all his activities undertaken for God's glory. When God directed that the Tabernacle be made to be the symbol of his presence among his people, he chose Bezalel and told Moses- "I have filled him with the Spirit of God to engage in all kinds of craftsmanship" (Exodus 31:1-5). Likewise, God filled with his Spirit those whom he chose to lead and govern his people (Judges 3:10) such as Saul (1 Samuel 10:6f) - "once these signs are fulfilled, do whatever your hands finds to do, for God is with you"; and David (1 Samuel 16:13). Even Cyrus the Persian was enabled by God for his work in regard to Israel. The blessing invoked on the good, God-fearing wife of Proverbs 31 is- "Give her of the fruit of her hands, and let her works praise her in the gates". It is worth noting the range of "works" which her "hands" have achieved. They include management, administration, commerce, teaching, investment and not only the use of the distaff and spindle. Biblical work is in fact of many kinds, and includes all the activities which are necessary for the well-being of our human communities - nations, tribes, cities and families - in which God has placed us. Its tests are the benefits it produces both for the "worker" and those for whose benefit he works. A ruler for instance - and a secular ruler at that - is "a minister of God to you for good" (Romans 12:4). Government tax collectors are also "ministers of God's service" (12:6). This passage shows how thoroughly God is concerned in the operation of human work. Diligence in work is, in the New Testament, part of the Christian's obligation to "command the respect of outsiders" (1 Thessalonians 4:12). The believer in God must be "ready for any honest work". "Our people", says Paul, should "learn to apply themselves to honourable occupations, so as to help cases of urgent

need, and not to be unfruitful" (Titus 3.14). In 2 Thessalonians 3.11 Paul condemns those Christians who are "living in idleness, mere busybodies not doing any work. Now such persons we command and exhort in the Lord Jesus Christ to do their work in quietness and to earn their own living". There is a clear link between earning one's own living and being able to assist more generously those who are in need. This is what Paul means by fruitfulness. "Good works" can be seen as a comprehensive idea; it includes not only deeds of mercy to the needy, but also the occupations which yield livelihood and the means of helping others; and both of these are among "the works of the law" as preached by the prophets, and much discussed in the New Testament. They do not justify, but they are the fruit of faith and love.

When is the Obligation to Work Superseded?

18. In the light of the Old Testament, understanding of work (in all its variety) as being according to God's ordinance and of St Paul's insistence that believers should work for their living as something essential to "fruitfulness", how are we to interpret Jesus' call, in the Gospels, to his disciples or would be disciples to forsake all possessions and means of livelihood, and to follow him? (eg Mark 1.16-20, 2.14, 10.21). Luke 14.33 is especially uncompromising- "whoever of you does not renounce all that he has cannot be my disciple". Is this a call to the few who are to be apostles and live by the gospel? Is it a call to all followers to give up their work? Is it a vivid and challenging way of confronting all Jesus' hearers with the paramount demands of the kingdom of God, which would radically change their attitude to all the affairs of this world, including possessions and the means of acquiring them, but without necessarily involving their abandonment?

19. Jesus was himself, by upbringing and until he was about thirty, a workman. The traditional translation of *tekton* (Mark 6.3, Matthew 13.55) is carpenter, though the term could designate a worker in any hard material, wood or metal. This was the trade of Joseph and thus naturally of Jesus ("the son always does what he sees his father do"; the saying in John 5.19 has a parabolic basis). Some theologians stress the importance of Jesus' occupation as a workman as enhancing the significance of his incarnation; he was "made like his brethren in every respect" (Hebrews 2.17). Alan Richardson sees in the description of Jesus as "doing all things well" (Mark 7.17) an implicit reference to Genesis 1.31 where "God saw everything that he had made, and behold it was very good". Richardson remarks that "in (Jesus') life the intention of God in creation is utterly fulfilled" (*A Theological Wordbook of the Bible* SCM 1950, p286). Jesus' affirmation of ordinary human work is also reflected in the pictures of human life he draws on in his parables. The force of a parable depends on the validity of the image in the common discourse. "The labourer is worthy of his hire" (Matthew 10.10), eg, is applied to itinerant preachers, but it depends for its force on a general human work condition recognised alike by Jesus and his hearers.

20. Yet the fact is that Jesus gave up his occupation as a workman in order to preach the gospel of the kingdom of God, and he called his disciples to do the same. It is interesting, however, that Jesus spoke of his new task as "working the works of God" (John 5.36); there was some sort of correlation between the two kinds of work. What Jesus did was not unprecedented. Some at least of the old prophets did likewise. Amos told his critics "I was a herdsman, and a dresser of sycamore trees, and the LORD took me from following the flock, and the LORD said unto me, Go, prophesy to my people Israel" (Amos 7.14f). The prophetic vocation reveals the overriding importance of the ministry of God's word in the world and the paramount concerns of the kingdom of God. But the prophetic, like the apostolic, vocation is clearly exceptional among God's people. "Are all apostles? are all prophets?" (1 Corinthians 13.29) The answer is no. The challenge of Jesus' example and teaching to "renounce all" comes to all, and is the call to "seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness", to "turn and become as a little child", to "be born from above", and to see everything in the light of the purpose of God to "make all things new" with one's mind on "things above and not on things on the earth". But only for those whom God calls to some special ministry does this involve leaving the work of fishing or being a customs clerk (for even tax collecting has God's sanction, Romans 13.6). So this means that the Christian man or woman sticks to the "calling wherein he was called" (1 Corinthians 7.20), ie his or her secular estate and occupation, unless God calls to a distinct apostolic, prophetic, evangelistic or teaching task.

21. The direction of Jesus to the crowds in Galilee not to work for the food which perishes but for the food which endures to eternal life (John 6.27) was not an incitement to them to give up their customary labour on which their livelihood depended. It was a call to them to look beyond the physical to the spiritual, and to desire the food which the Father gives through the Son. Sir Edwyn Hoskyns, commenting on John 6, says- "The subject matter of the discourse, stated concisely in the words *work ... for the meat which abideth unto eternal life* (cf iv 14), is set in motion, not by the Feeding of the Five Thousand, but by the straightforward fact that the Galilean peasants work, and for that reason receive their sustenance from those for whom they work. This realistic situation is, however, not an end in itself. If, as Chrysostom says, men are "nailed to the things of this life", their work has not been wrought in God nor are they men who do the truth (iii.2, iv.34). That they receive bread is a parable or sign of the gift of the abiding and eternal food which Jesus the Son of man will give them. (*The Fourth Gospel*, Faber, 1947, p292) The point, using physical labour and its reward as the image, is the same as appears in John 4. The Samaritan woman is led by Jesus' words to look beyond the toil of "coming all the way hither to draw" water from Jacob's well, which was her particular work, to the living water which

Messiah Jesus gives. In both instances the work of daily life is assumed, and no doubt continued. It is shown to have no final end in itself. There is a higher "work", the "work of God", which is to believe on him whom God has sent. But this higher work does not displace the necessity and benefit of earthly work; rather it gives a new perspective to our earthly works in the performance of which we may and should "glorify God" (1 Corinthians 10.31). So Paul enjoins workers- "serve wholeheartedly, as if you were serving the Lord, not men, because you know that the Lord will reward everyone for whatever good he does, whether he is slave or free" (Ephesians 6.5-8, also Colossians 3.23-25).

22. It should not be thought that, because certain ministries of God's Word are of greater significance for the salvation of mankind than, say, manual labour, an individual Christian can of his own volition take it upon himself to leave his work and assume a ministerial role. Jesus chose those whom he sent out to preach from among a much larger body of disciples (see Mark 1.17ff, 2.14, 3.13f, Luke 10.1, John 15.16).

23. The Preacher in Ecclesiastes warns us that the labours of this world have no continuance in the grave, and are therefore not the ultimate good. But he concludes that we are to enjoy the life God has given us, "for it is now that God favours what you do" (9.7). Therefore, whatever your hand finds to do, do it with all your might". The Preacher speaks without the hope of glory and of the life of the world to come in Christ, but he is right as far as he goes, and it is his counsel which St Paul adopts and builds on in Colossians 3.17 "whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him", and again in 3.23, "whatever your task, work heartily as serving the Lord and not men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward- you are serving the Lord Christ".

24. Thus God has a purpose for his creation which will be fulfilled in the new creation. We are his co-workers in his creation, exercising the dominion over the world that he has given us. There is certainly ambiguity in our toil, because of sin (Genesis 3), but the labours of our hands because they forward his purposes, are pleasing to him as we perform them in faith, hope and love. Moreover, it is our "good works" performed in honesty, equity and compassion which is the light seen by others, leading them to glorify God, as they recognise him as good, just and compassionate. It is the Christian labourer, manager, secretary, politician, tradesman, lawyer, public servant, who does the work of God for the benefit of the world. The ministry of the Word reveals the light of God's truth over all his works, and points us to the reality beyond the present creation; but the disposing of his servants for this work or that is entirely in the hands of the Master.

The Reformed View of Martin Luther & John Calvin

25. With this theological background, the committee then considered the work of Luther and Calvin as being part of the reformed tradition, which forms part of the tradition of this Diocese. These commentators had given some consideration to the nature and value of work within our society separately from the ordained or full-time ministry of the Word. The committee noted that this work had also been the subject of consideration in other articles written on this topic. The committee particularly noted the work of Elizabeth Parker (Zadok Paper S77, October 1995 p 3f at p 4).

26. Parker writes -

"For Luther, the Christian's vocation had two elements corresponding to his twin notions of the kingdom of heaven and the kingdom of earth. First there is the call of grace to enter the kingdom of heaven by faith and forgiveness. This frees the Christian to fulfil the second element of vocation *in the kingdom of earth* which is to serve God by serving others, not to earn merit but out of love and gratitude for God's grace. All Christians are *called* by God to salvation, and to serve their neighbours in their ordinary earthly life. Through Luther's eyes, then, work was a part of the Christian's vocation, whatever their role in society. Simply by faithfully fulfilling the duties of the station in which God had placed them a person would be a fulfilled Christian because, according to Luther, they would contribute to God's own plan for serving their neighbours- "the order of stations in the earthly kingdom has been instituted by God himself as his way of seeing that the needs of humanity are met on a day-to-day basis". Daily work was given a whole new significance as participation in God's own providence -

God himself will milk the cows through him whose vocation that is. He who engages in the lowliness of his work performs God's work, be he lad or king. To give one's office proper care is not selfishness. Devotion to office is devotion to love, because it is by God's own ordering that the work of the office is always dedicated to the well-being of one's neighbour. Care for one's office is, in its very frame of reference on earth, participation in God's own care for human beings."

27. Service to neighbour was the way Luther linked daily life and work with christian vocation. This understanding of vocation as important for all Christians in all walks of life continued to be an important part of the Reformation church.

28. With respect to John Calvin, in his writings he emphasised the fact that God intends Christians to work for mutual service. Since people have different gifts, in society they are all dependent on each other's service.

Therefore each person must find a place in life where he or she can exercise their particular gifts for the common good- "all the gifts we possess have been bestowed by God and entrusted to us on condition that they be distributed for our neighbour's benefit".

29. For Calvin, and later Calvinists, it was not clear that existing social structures would naturally provide a place where each Christian could fulfil his or her vocation. Christians must actively seek to use their talents and abilities to serve their neighbour even if this meant changing their station in life. But the central criterion was still to remain- service to one's neighbour.

30. As the Doctrine Commission in its report considered "work" and, as highlighted in the preceding discussion, the key issue is to consider the matter of "service" rather than "work". This service commences by God's call. In our society, work has its meaning of paid employment or an occupation carried on for financial gain or profit. However, service, whilst including this, broadens to allow consideration of all spheres of active life within our society, whether involving payment or not. This view of service does allow for voluntary work, home duties, service to families, preparation for work and allows for recognition of those who may be classified as unemployed, but who are really in many ways still actively responding to God's call and serving the society around them. The risk in our Christian world is to focus on work in the same way as our secular world does, where it is equated to money's worth. If that is the case, then service, which cannot be measured by way of money or money's worth, would be considered of little or no value. It is noted that economists appear to enjoy trying to convert every aspect of life within our society to money or money's worth. The committee considers that the value should be placed on service, whether it has monetary value or not. Service involves an honouring to God and a use of the gifts which he has given.

Conclusion

31. Thus in this discussion, the committee would prefer to see the word "service" used in many instances rather than the word "work". As the Doctrine Commission rightly states "indeed, if we make a rough calculation of the worth of any kind of work, it may be found in its usefulness for the lives of others (equals service)".

32. We also recognise that there is a step of faith involved in entering full-time ministry in becoming dependent on a church which can be weak, demanding, fickle and changing - yet support is indeed an obligation placed on the church.

33. In taking this step, it is in answer to a call of God. The response to this call, if it is to full-time ministry, must be wholehearted and enthusiastic, particularly if it is to be supported by voluntary giving by other members of the Christian church. There must be a willingness to give account for the work being undertaken to those providing such support and the commitment should be at least as great as those who are providing the support in their endeavour to promote such ministry.

34. In God's own work of creation, God gave man work to undertake to care for the world. Part of that work, without doubt, is to glorify God and to enjoy our relationship with Him. Part of this involves obedience to his Word and sharing that Word with all people. For this, some are called to full-time ministry, while others to voluntary ministry of the Word without seeking such support. In the latter case, they continue to support themselves through their own work or service. All Christians are called to this activity of service to God and such service is of equal and no less importance whether that person derives support from others or through his or her own working.

35. It is clear that not all Christians are called into full-time ministry. There are many ways of serving God, sharing God's work, teaching and evangelising. There may be a choice and that choice can lead to a secular vocation which can bring to God service which is true and honourable -whether as a leader in any area or as a quiet Christian working with his or her hands, being a living sacrifice, showing those around him or her the true nature of God and His call for repentance, belief and faith.

36. In adopting the wording which forms the first part of resolution 50/95, the committee considers that the Synod has effectively adopted the words which is a fitting summary to our consideration of these matters and we repeat those words again as follows -

"This Synod recognises, encourages and supports the roles of Godly men and women in their everyday work vocation - as distinct from ordained or full-time ministry - and affirms its belief that such work of service in and to the world, done in the name of the Lord Jesus and by God's enabling, is true and laudable service rendered to God Himself by those whose vocation and ministry it is, and is no less acceptable to Him than the Ministry of the Word."

For and on behalf of the committee

STEPHEN JUDD
Secretary

20 May 1999