

## Redeeming Work: Living Wholly within God's Reign

### Imagine: your work and God's mission. (On developing a theology of work)<sup>1</sup>

*So, you say, God has a mission in the world. But...*

*Question: What does God's mission in the world look like, anyway? How would I know it if I saw it?*

*Answer: There goes Emily...Look, she's getting out of her car and going to work. Oh, over there, see there's Jacob again, working in his garden. And, look! Over there, there's a work team collaborating on a project. And look at that way over there, a worshipping congregation: those people there are seeing their entire lives – including their work – as somehow taking part in God's mission.*

**What if....?** When we look at our lives, we often bring to mind our own personal aspirations, the opportunities we've had or that we wish for, our life goals. But what if we were to understand our lives – including our work – as our participation in the mission of God in the world? How would we look at our lives and our work differently?

**God's mission  
and our work  
– there's a  
connection!**

God's mission in the world can be summed up by the Hebrew word *shalom*: God's gift of healing, reconciliation, restoration, and wholeness for all of creation. And the good news is that God has in Jesus Christ definitively acted to inaugurate a new social order marked by God's *shalom*. The Christian faith community is taking part in the beginnings of this new order now!

What if we came to see our entire lives, including all of our work, as an expression of our discipleship? What if we began to recognize that all of our behavior either was working *with* God to bring healing, wholeness, and restoration to all of creation, or working *against*? Then, if I were to be asked, "What is God doing in the world?" I might answer by saying, "Look, there goes Emily..." To be given a glimpse of what God is doing in the world is to be reminded of countless ways in which our work—including unremunerated work—may be used to further God's purposes in the world.

### **As helpful as this line of thinking is, the implications are challenging**

Raising the question of God's mission in the world and how our work contributes to or diminishes God's purposes, can create difficult tensions. Most obvious are those regarding the kinds of work Christians should be willing to do. The conventional position is that it doesn't matter what kind of work you do as long as you "do it for the Lord." There is some wisdom in this approach, but it is often taken to mean that *we need not reflect at all* on the kind of work we do. While we can agree that Christians should not be involved in some work, such as the pornography industry, what about

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<sup>1</sup>This blog post is adapted from Phil Kenneson's article in *Leaven: A Journal of Christian Ministry* entitled "Learning to Take Joy in Our work: Some Preliminary Theological Reflections." Volume 12, No.2, Second Quarter 2004.

other kinds of work that directly or indirectly denigrate human beings? Are there other kinds of work that intentionally and deliberately warp God's good gifts?

### Consider these issues:

**Issues of Economy.** How are Christians to understand and evaluate the economic systems in which their work is largely framed? The work-for-pay that most of us do is embedded within a complex economic system, that may be the best system known yet to humankind but a system that is still terribly flawed and rife with inequity. For example, Christians in the United States find themselves part of an economy that requires for its "health" the ever-expanding consumption of goods and services!

**All-consuming consumption.** Because the majority of people in our society already have their basic needs met, the economic challenge is to stimulate desires within people so that they will want considerably *more* than they need. This means that many of our fellow citizens, as well as many of our fellow Christians, are engaged in industries whose work involves the stimulation of disordered desire: the advertising and marketing industries. In our society a "good job" is one that pays well and offers decent health and retirement benefits. But shouldn't a "good job" also involve being asked to do "good work," that is, work that is good not primarily because people get paid to do it but because it's work worth doing?

### We can do this – a Theology of Work.

Of all people, Christians should be most willing to talk about whether all is well with an economic system that requires for its "health" both the formation of perpetually dissatisfied consumers and employment of countless numbers of fellow creatures in largely meaningless work. Christians desperately need a more robust theology of work if they are to find joy in their work and if they are to find work in which they can take joy. I do not assume that there are easy answers to any of these problems addressed above; nor do I assume that Christians will ultimately all agree about how best to address them. But I would like to think that if we could forge some preliminary agreements about how such issues might be framed theologically, then we could at least have some interesting disagreements. Currently, the silence of most churches on these matters is both deafening and maddening.

#### Why attention to our work lives belongs in our churches.

"Because work is one of the most significant facets of life, one would assume the issue would be frequently addressed in the church. One would think that we would expend as much energy on work as we do our children, youth, and family programs. However, we find very few ministries specifically directed toward the questions of faith and work in the local church."<sup>1</sup>

### Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. How would you describe God's mission in the world?
2. What are the implications of seeing work as an expression of discipleship?
3. Identify two or three "uncomfortable" questions that Kenneson's essay raises for you.
4. Would you agree with Street (see sidebar) that the topic of work is seldom discussed in the church? If so, why do think that is?
5. Why does the church "desperately need" a theology of work?