

# AN OUTLINE OF THEOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS ON THE PURPOSE OF WORK

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## Introduction

Since the Reformation, and especially during the past quarter-century, church scholars of various Christian traditions have tried to make sense of the meaning of human labor. These efforts are significant. If we are to help ourselves and others integrate Christian faith with the daily activities of the workaday world, the purpose of work and vocation must be adequately understood within the larger contours of our theology and world view. Therefore, I have identified and briefly summarized several "theologies of work" that, in my view, represent various evangelical and mainline Protestant and Roman Catholic traditions. Naturally, they reflect the specific theological presuppositions and beliefs that underlie their views of faith and spiritual life.

This brief summary was originally prepared for my seminar, *Toward a Practical Theology of Work*, a six-week non-credit course offered by the Mockler Center for Faith and Ethics in the Workplace at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary in 2002 and 2003. My purpose was to familiarize students with the various theological resources that deal with the meaning of work, so that they could practically and pastorally apply their theological reflection to real-world situations in the marketplace. In this seminar, students read and discussed a series of essays on different Christian models for understanding the meaning of work.

I have identified those models and their sources according to the following representative categories:

- Vocational Models (Lutheran and Reformed)
- Trinitarian Model
- Charismatic Model
- Ontological Model
- Collaborative Model (Roman Catholic)

## VOCATIONAL MODEL (LUTHERAN)

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### Selected article

Veith, Gene Edward. "The Doctrine of Vocation: How God Hides in Human Work." *Modern Reformation* 8:3 (May/June 1999).

### Quote from article

"The Reformation doctrine of vocation teaches that God himself is active in everyday human labor, family responsibilities, and social interactions."

### Key points of the article

1. God uses everyday work to providentially care for human beings through their talents, opportunities, and stations in life; Luther called this the "mask of God."
2. People are providentially called into various vocations based on the God-ordained circumstances of their life. For example, a man may be simultaneously a farmer, citizen, churchman, husband, and father, and is thus *called* by God to those vocations.
3. The purpose of one's vocation is to serve other people.

### Further reading

#### Primary historical sources

Luther, Martin. "To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation Concerning the Reform of the Christian Estate." In *The Christian in Society I*. Edited by James Atkinson. Vol. 44, Luther's Works. Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1962.

\_\_\_\_\_. "Treatise on Good Works." In *The Christian in Society I*. Edited by James Atkinson. Vol. 44, Luther's Works. Muhlenberg Press, 1962.

#### Secondary sources

Hardy, Lee. "Our Work, God's Providence: The Christian Concept of Vocation," pp. 45-54. In *The Fabric of This World: Inquiries into Calling, Career Choice and the Design of Human Work*. Eerdmans, 1990.

Hart, Ian. "The Teaching of Luther and Calvin about Ordinary Work; Part I." *Evangelical Quarterly* 67 (1995): 35-52.

Veith, Gene Edward. *God at Work: The Spirituality of Ordinary Life*. Crossway Books, 2002.

Wingren, Gustaf. *Luther on Vocation*. Muhlenberg Press, 1957.

## VOCATIONAL MODEL (REFORMED)

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### Selected article

Hart, D. G. "Work as (Spiritual) Discipline." *Modern Reformation* 11:4 (July/August 2002).

### Quote from article

"The doctrine of creation and providence, in the reformers' hands, elevated work that was once thought to be tainted because of its "worldliness" into a calling blessed by God."

### Key points of the article

1. Work is founded upon *Providence*: God cares for His creation through our work, thus all legitimate vocations are significant to God.
2. Work involves *Worship*: We worship God through obedience to Him in all areas of life; thus our attitude makes work meaningful.
3. Work provides a context for *Sanctification*: Work cultivates godliness (especially moderation and self-control); thus any job can transform us.

### Further reading

#### Primary historical sources

Calvin, John. "Vocation." *Institutes of the Christian Religion* III.X.VI. Edited by John T. McNeill. Vols. 20-21, Library of Christian Classics. Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960.

Perkins, William. "Vocations and the Callings of Men." *The Works of William Perkins*. Ian Breward, ed. Sutton Courtenay Press, 1970.

Henry, Carl F. H. "The Christian View of Work." In *Aspects of Christian Social Ethics*. Eerdmans, 1964, reprint, Baker Book House, 1980.

#### Secondary sources

Barnett, Robert. "Calvin's Doctrine of Vocation." Unpublished paper. Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, 2002.

Curtis, Heather. *Worship and Work: The Puritan Doctrine of Vocation*. M.A. thesis, Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, May 1998.

Graham, W. Fred. *The Constructive Revolutionary. John Calvin and His Socio-Economic Impact*. Richmond, VA John Knox Press, 1971.

Hardy, Lee. "Our Work, God's Providence: The Christian Concept of Vocation," pp. 54-67. In *The Fabric of This World: Inquiries into Calling, Career Choice and the Design of Human Work*. Eerdmans, 1990.

Hart, Ian. "The Teaching of Luther and Calvin about Ordinary Work: Part II." *Evangelical Quarterly* 67 (1995): 121-135.

\_\_\_\_\_. "The Teaching of the Puritans about Ordinary Work." *Evangelical Quarterly* 67 (1995): 195-209.

Haverland, John A. *Vocation and Kingdom: A Biblical and Calvinist Perspective*. Th.M. thesis, Calvin Theological Seminary, 1984.

## TRINITARIAN MODEL

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### Selected article

Meeks, M. Douglas. "God and Work." In *God the Economist: The Doctrine of God and Political Economy*. Fortress Press, 1998.

### Quote from article

"A humanizing economy depends on the creation of meaningful work for every person who is able and wants to work. This is necessary for the formation of a community that can realize human rights and redistribute wealth."

### Key points of the article

1. Each person of the Trinity engages in distinctive personal work - the Father creates, the Son redeems, and the Spirit empowers the mission of the Father and Son. Thus, all people have a right to meaningful work according to one's abilities.
2. The Trinity engages in cooperative work; each Person of the Trinity engages in work that coinheres in the work of the other Persons. Thus, human work must contribute to the life of the community.
3. The Trinity engages in egalitarian work - the work of one Person of the Trinity is not elevated higher than that of the other Persons. Thus, all forms of work that exploit or dominate are wrong.
4. The Trinity engages in self-giving love toward each other. Incentives to work should not be dehumanizing are wrong (e.g., denigration of toilsome work over and above leisure; or exaltation of success without regard for the position or welfare of others in the community).

### Further reading

Preece, Gordon. "The Three-fold Call: The Trinitarian Character of Our Everyday Vocations." In *Faith Goes to Work: Reflections from the Marketplace*, ed. Robert J. Banks. Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1993.

Stevens, R. Paul. *The Other Six Days: Vocation, Work, and Ministry in Biblical Perspective*. Eerdmans, 1999.

\_\_\_\_\_. "Towards a Trinitarian Work Ethic." *Vocatio* 1:1 (February 1998): 15-19.

## CHARISMATIC MODEL

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### Selected article

Volf, Miroslav. "Human Work, Divine Spirit, and New Creation: Toward a Pneumatological Understanding of Work." *Pneuma* 9 (1987): 173-193.

### Quote from article

"When God calls people to become God's children the Spirit gives them both callings and capabilities in the form of chrisms to do particular tasks either in the Christian fellowship or in the world."

### Key points of the article

1. Work is the exercise of one's *Charisma* (spiritual gifts, talents, and abilities) to accomplish God's purposes both inside and outside of the Church; both Christians and non-Christians are given such spiritual gifts.
2. Work can have lasting significance when it is involved in the Spirit's instrumental purpose to transform creation (there is continuity between the old and new creation). Thus, work does not have significance if it is not clearly transforming culture.
3. Work has an ethical implication: "Occupation should create the social space for the free exercise of one's gifts in the service of one's neighbor; occupations that do not meet such criteria should be changed." Hardy, "Review of *Work in the Spirit*." 193.

### Further reading

Hardy, Lee, "Review of Miroslav Volf's *Work in the Spirit*." *Calvin Theological Journal* 28 (1993): 191-196).

Volf, Miroslav. *Work in the Spirit: Toward a Theology of Work*. Oxford University Press, 1991. Reprint, Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2001.

## ONTOLOGICAL MODEL

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### Selected article

Cosden, Darrell. "The Threefold Definition of Work and Its Application," pp. 153-161. In *Theology of Work*. Ph.D. thesis. St. Andrews University, 1998.

### Quote from article

"Human work is a transformative activity essentially consisting of dynamically interrelated instrumental, relational, and ontological dimensions: whereby, along with work being an end in itself, the worker's and others' needs are providentially met; believers' sanctification is occasioned; and workers express, explore and develop their humanness while building up their natural, social and cultural environments thereby contributing protectively and productively to the order of this world and the one to come."

### Key points of the article

1. Work is instrumental (work is a means to an end). Work provides sustenance to the worker and to society and enables personal spiritual formation.
2. Work is relational (work is a means to an end). Work provides for personal self-fulfillment and is a context for social relationships. Work enables the development and improvement of societal structures.
3. Work is ontological (work is an end itself). Work has value through its relationship to creation. Since we are created in the image of God (who is a worker), our work is significant because we model God's nature. Thus, all legitimate work has significance, no matter how mundane or ordinary. Work has value through its eschatological status (its relationship to the new creation as work is transformed and glorified along with all of creation in the consummation). Thus, work has significance because it is related to God's ultimate purposes.

### Further reading

Cosden, Darrell. *Theology of Work*. Ph.D. thesis. St. Andrews University, 1998.

Moltmann, Jürgen. "The Right to Meaningful Work." In *On Human Dignity: Political Theology and Ethics*. Translated with an introduction by M. Douglas Meeks. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984.

## COLLABORATIVE MODEL (ROMAN CATHOLIC)

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### Selected article

John Paul II. "Work and Man" and "Elements for a Spirituality of Work." Chapters in *Laborem Exercens: Encyclical Letter of the Supreme Pontif John Paul II on Human Work*. Catholic Truth Society, 1981.

### Quote from article

"Sweat and toil, which work necessarily involves in the present condition of the human race, present the Christian and everyone who is called to follow Christ with the possibility of sharing lovingly in the work that Christ came to do. This work of salvation came about through suffering and death on a Cross. By enduring the toil of work in union with Christ crucified for us, man in a way collaborates with the Son of God for the redemption of humanity. He shows himself a true disciple of Christ by carrying the cross in his turn every day in the activity that he is called upon to perform."

### Key points of the article

1. Work has an objective meaning. Humans share in the activity of the Creator through cultural and economic activity to sustain and improve the worker, the worker's family, and the community. Thus ordinary activities and work contribute to God's work.
2. Work has a subjective meaning. Humans are created in the image of God and are persons capable of self-realization - work is valued because of the worker rather than the product of work. Thus, work has meaning only when it allows men and women to realize their humanity.
3. All work is linked with toil and difficulty. Through work, men and women are able to collaborate with Christ in His labor to redeem humanity.

### Further reading

#### Primary historical sources

John Paul II. *Laborem Exercens: Encyclical Letter of the Supreme Pontif John Paul II on Human Work*. Catholic Truth Society, 1981.

#### Secondary sources

Cosden, Darrell. "Modern Roman Catholic Social Teaching and Work, pp. 21-35. In *Theology of Work*. Ph.D. thesis. St. Andrews University, 1998.

Hardy, Lee. "Our Work, God's Providence: The Christian Concept of Vocation," pp. 67-76. In *The Fabric of This World: Inquiries into Calling, Career Choice and the Design of Human Work*. Eerdmans, 1990.

Houck, John W., and Oliver F. Williams, eds. *Co-Creation and Capitalism: John Paul II's Laborem Exercens*. University Press of America, 1983.

Novak, Michael. *Business as a Calling: Work and the Examined Life*. The Free Press, 1996.

Kaiser, Edwin G. *Theology of Work*. Newman Press, 1966.

Wyszynski, Stefan Cardinal. *Working Your Way into Heaven: How to Make Work, Stress, and Drudgery a Means to Your Sanctity*. Sophia Institute Press, 1995.