

Study 1: A theology of work

Key idea:

How we live our lives as Christians is shaped fundamentally by our theology. Good ethical living, being effective disciples and living faithful lives, all flow from who we think God is, and how we let him lead and shape us. To be workers who please God, we need to understand where work fits into God's plans for us and his world. As God has made us in his image, and he is a worker, work is fundamental to who we are.

Getting started

1. Ask each member of the group to briefly explain what paid work they do (e.g. employer, title, where they fit into the organisation, what they do each day, full-time/part-time, length of commute).
2. Ask each person one thing they like about their work, and one thing they don't like.
3. Ask each person why they work and what they expect to get out of work. [Please be careful with this question. Some people work for the primary reason of earning an income so they, and any of their dependants, can survive. Others will express views on personal satisfaction, contributing to society, or realising their God-given potential. Others may express deep ambivalence. Yet, each person is of equal, and infinite, value to God, so do not let this question establish barriers between people in your group.]

The building blocks of our theology

4. Reflecting on Genesis 1, in what ways can we say God is a worker?
5. What does God think about his work? [It is good. It reflects his character as the source of all good.]
6. What are the implications of Genesis 1:27 for us as workers? [God is a worker. We are made in his image, which means, in part, that we are made as workers. Work is essential to our identities. Also God is relational. He is love, the love shared between Father, Son and Holy Spirit. And, as we bear his image, we are made for relationship with him and each other. The closer we image/reflect God through our work, the

more good we will do. No work is 'just a job'. Our work is important to God.]

7. What do you think is God's purpose for our work? [Genesis 1:28-30. Some translations will say we are made to 'subdue' the world. A better translation is 'steward' or 'care for' creation. We are made to care for God's creation and for relationship with him and our neighbours. Work is an important way that we fulfil God's purposes in us.]
8. What is the relationship between this very broad understanding of work, and paid employment? [Paid employment is a sub-set of work. It is an important part of work, but it is not the only form of work. Students work through their care for creation and other people. Stay-at home parents are clearly working, as are all carers (paid and unpaid)].
9. How would you describe the way your work fits in with this understanding of God's plans for work? [People in caring industries (e.g. doctors, nurses, teachers and aid workers) often find it easier to answer this questions than others. But make sure everyone has a go. 'I'm a cleaner. People like to live in clean safe places. So my work helps other people and takes care of God's creation'. 'I'm a real estate agent. I help people buy and sell homes so they can have a place to live'. 'I'm a used care salesperson. Transport and mobility are important to the way we live, work and socialise. I help people who can't afford a new car'. 'I'm a commercial lawyer. I help companies comply with the law and stay in business so they can produce goods and services that people need and keep people in jobs.' Etc.]
10. In what ways can we call work 'worship'? [The heart of worship is obedience to God's will. We worship God through our work by being obedient to him in the way we go about our work. So, work is a form of worship.]
11. Where does 'retirement' fit into God's plans for us? [As we will bear God's image until we die (and into eternity), we never cease to be workers. 'Retirement' is not a biblical concept. Whatever our age and capacity, we can always seek to do some good through how we use God's creation and relate to the people. 'Retirement' is a complex subject for Christians, as some seniors 'switch off', while others (rightly) resent the lack of opportunities available to them. Retirement from paid employment may be necessary so there is work for younger people, and a necessary redistribution of wealth to them. However, we are made to work, not to retire, so there is still scope to work beyond retirement from paid employment.]

12. What does 'rest' mean in Genesis 2:2? [God seems to enjoy the fruits of his work. 'Rest' is not synonymous with inactivity, but, in later studies, we will need to consider the interrelationship between strenuous mental, physical and emotional activity, recovery, restoration, leisure, and the way we use our time.]
13. How do these building blocks of a theology of work (e.g. we are made as workers to care for God's creation and each other, and our work is important to God) compare to other attitudes to work you have heard from Christians? [Have you ever confronted limited views of work that suggest that the primary purpose of secular employment is to fund gospel work, or that work is great place to do evangelism? Note: we will look at 'Conversion through the workplace' in study 8].
14. What do these building blocks of a theology of work mean for the way you think about and do your work? [Some people may feel more positive about their work. Others may think this is all too theoretical. That's OK. The purpose of this study is to provide building blocks that will help us with more practical issues.]

End of Study

Study Notes: Some further reflections

God tells us that his plans for humanity include caring for his creation. As the story of the Bible unfolds we see this includes not just farming, but a great diversity of productive use of his creation, and, most importantly, caring for each other - loving our neighbours as God loves us.

Work became harder at the fall, and will be better in the age to come. But work is just how God has made us. When Paul said in 2 Thessalonians 3 that a person who does not work does not eat, he did not have in mind people who are unable to work. But the fundamental link between work and humanity suggests that we should try hard to find ways to ensure that the limitations of our economy, our bodies and minds, **and the difficulties of work**, do not preclude us from the opportunity to care for this world and each other through our work.

So, way before you get to work being an opportunity to earn money to support Christian ministry or a place to do evangelism, we see that the work itself, working with our hands and minds, caring for the world and each other, are of fundamental importance to God and our place in his plans.

I mention 'supporting ministry and doing evangelism', because all too often these views of work seem to dominate, either explicitly or implicitly. There is important truth in both, but separately and together they are not the totality of our theology of work. They are usually championed by people who have never worked much in secular employment, and do not have the experience to understand both the challenges and opportunities Christians face in the workplace.

We serve God best at our work by working well (study 2), doing our jobs diligently, and caring for all the people we interact with. When we do that, we will both please God and proclaim Christ. I am not putting down word based ministries, but we do not all need to take up word based ministries, because our work is already valuable to God.

Additional reading: Timothy Keller, *Every Good Endeavour*, and Ben Witherington III, *Work: A Kingdom Perspective of Work*.