

The Heavenly Good of Earthly Work

Written by Darrel Cosden, 2006

Many problems in our view of the world - and therefore in our work in it - grow out of the overuse of the right answer to the wrong question. When Martin Luther declared “through faith alone,” the question he was seeking to answer was this: “do I have to keep up all these rituals and self denial to win God’s favor or is faith alone enough?” His answer, “through faith alone,” is perfect for this question. But if we try to apply it to others...

- Why are we here on earth?
- What will help me grow spiritually?
- What is the meaning of work?
- How will God supply our daily needs?
- Where is history taking us?

...we can run into real problems. Our understanding of work is one area that needs to be re-examined. Too many of our thoughts about work have grown out of inadequate answers to some of our most basic questions.

Fortunately, **a growing number of theologians and missional thinkers have begun to turn their thoughts towards work.** It is an exciting time for re-examining and re-imagining the meaning of Christ’s life on earth, the nature of mission and calling, the broad extent of our salvation - and what these new understandings might mean in the daily outworking of our lives in Christ.

Cosden divides his work into three parts:

- In Part 1 he attempts to explain how we have arrived at our current understanding of work and how this understanding is inadequate.
- Part 2 explores major Biblical texts and lays a foundation for a new understanding of work.
- Part 3 teases out some broad implications of this new understanding, redefining both our view of spirituality and of mission.

The problems in our current understanding, according to Cosden, are many. On a practical level, any view of work that makes some work primary (i.e. “religious” or “spiritual” work) and others secondary (i.e. physical, temporal or even service oriented work) automatically makes some people God’s favored and other people less favored. According to Cosden, this hierarchy lies at the root of much of the frustration most people feel about their jobs.

Designed for significance, most people feel cut off from what is “truly” important or eternal.

Cosden traces the root of this practical frustration to a flawed theology, a theology that simply does not reflect the true nature of God and the fullness of the world he has made. In terms of our view of work, this flaw is amazingly widespread: it can be found in contemporary Catholic writings and as far back as Luther in the Protestant world. Cosden dives deeply into Luther’s theology and sees in Luther’s attempt to give people a view of work free of compulsion, too sharp a distinction between faith and works. While achieving a healthy separation between God’s love and our performance, **Luther’s “two realms” approach to God and his Kingdom had the unforeseen consequence of putting practical, physical work in a category that is less important than “spiritual” or religious work.** Luther’s vision was an improvement over the previous view that divided people into

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“clerical” and “lay,” but his vision still preserves a fundamental dualism: instead of dividing people, Luther simply shifted the divide to two types of work, “secular” and “spiritual.”

Although Cosden’s exploration of the Biblical texts is at times too technical and at other times not technical enough, his big ideas are very intriguing. As others have noted (see NT Wright, especially Surprised by Hope), the resurrected Christ is our model for understanding God’s intentions for both mankind and for our world. **In Christ’s resurrection, we see a picture of the world to come and an understanding of what God considers worthy of salvation.** Jesus’ new body is both a continuation of what was before - he still ate, drank and could be touched - but also distinct - he was able to pass through walls! In terms of human work, his scars, an artifact of human efforts, will remain into eternity. Thus, we see in the resurrection of Christ God’s intention to transform and resurrect human, physical life and at least some part of our work in it. Creation is not meant to be destroyed and replaced but transformed and redeemed.

Cosden argues that this intention to redeem and not replace is supported throughout the Bible. He builds his theological argument on Paul’s understanding of salvation (spelled out in Romans 8), John’s picture of the new heavens and new earth (Revelation 21 and 22) and on an examination of God’s original plans for us (Genesis 1-11).

According to Cosden, Paul’s understanding of salvation can be seen in terms of layers. God’s love for his son causes him to save him from death and decay, and it is clearly “in Christ” that our salvation is secured. Interestingly, however, creation is not also saved directly “in Christ” but is saved in connection to mankind’s salvation. God’s plan of salvation comes in layers: in Christ we find righteousness (v. 4) and glory (v. 18), and then, “inside” our salvation, the rest of creation is glorified. In our freedom the material world will also be set free, so that just as our salvation is “in Christ,” so the natural world’s salvation, almost shockingly, is “in us.”

“The creation itself also will be set free from its slavery into the freedom of the glory of the children of God.” (Romans 8:21)

A key to understanding the implications on work is the orthodox (though often overlooked) understanding of the distinction Paul is making in this and other passages concerning “spirit” and “flesh.” As NT Wright explains¹, the contrast is not between a material and therefore evil physical existence and a pure non-material (i.e. “spiritual”) existence. (Such ideas are Plato’s, not God’s!) The contrast here is between self-reliance and dependency on God. In Eugene Petersen’s rendering of Romans 8, he describes the flesh as “fractured human nature,” doing things on our own and “obsession with self.” The opposite of such living is not an escape from the physical and material world but entering “Christ’s being-here-for-us” and paying “attention to God.” Only this kind of understand makes passages like v. 11 make sense: “He who raised Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through His Spirit who dwells in you.”

Mankind’s work, therefore, rests on this very real, very physical salvation. Just as our individual salvation enables us and “obliges” (Romans 8:12) us to a new kind of living, so

¹ See Surprised by Hope, p. 149 and pp. 43-44.

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God's plans for the physical should encourage us to take our work seriously. In Christ, we are redeemed, and surprisingly, it is somehow through us, in concert with God, that the rest of creation can even now experience some small measure of healing.

This arrangement makes sense, according to Cosden, because of mankind's, - Adam's - unique role in the created order as God's representative on earth. God's salvation does not replace or bypass the first Adam: just as Adam was created to be fully material and fully spiritual, so the "new Adam" - Jesus - is resurrected both materially and spiritually. **It is this physical salvation of Jesus that points to the physical salvation of the earth - and makes room for us to partner with God through work.**

This view of God's intention for mankind and the role of work is further supported, according to Cosden, by John's description of the new heaven and new earth, as outlined in Revelation 21 and 22. Far from being a return to a garden state, the new creation is a mixture of garden and city. It includes both God's own handiwork as well as our own. **Instead of replacing the old earth with some type of pure "heavenly" material, the new creation redeems the old and combines it with the heavenly**, something that even the garden of Eden did not achieve, but, according to Cosden, was God's intention from the beginning.

Digging into Genesis 1-11, Cosden points out the central role of human work in the sweeping drama we find in Genesis 1:1 - 2:2. In this initial scene, human beings are the clear climax, and deeply embedded in our creation is the role of work. Instead of an add-on after the fall (as a type of punishment for our sin), work is a central part of our creation: **we are made in the image of God and called to express this image through our care for the earth.**

Throughout this discussion for Revelation and Genesis, Cosden brings up the intriguing idea that **from the beginning, the uniting of heaven and earth - and our work in achieving this union - was all part of God's initial plan.** Instead of a creation whose sole purpose was to give God something to redeem (as some Christians' view of the gospel seems to imply) God's plan never "required" a fall. His comments reminded me of a Christmas sermon a colleague of mine once built around this question: if there was no fall, would Christ have been born on earth anyway? Though not a central part of his own argument, Cosden's suggestion seems to be yes! At some point when mankind was ready, Christ would have come to help further our understanding and growth into the full image of God and complete the journey to that "garden city" we see in Revelation 21 and 22. It is an intriguing idea.

This original vision, though put on hold by our rebellion and sin, God will nevertheless achieve through a salvation that includes but is ultimately bigger than saving individuals. According to Cosden, salvation is four-fold:

1. Salvation restores a flourishing personal relationship with God.
2. Salvation restores a whole relationship with individuals and their true identity.
3. Salvation restores harmonious relationships between people.
4. **Salvation will be culminated in a new heaven and new earth where God, humanity and the rest of creation will finally achieve God's origin design.**

Throughout this Biblical overview (and indeed the whole book) Cosden is careful to not skirt mankind's real failures to live out such a vision. He discusses freely the destruction mankind

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has brought to our world - more of hell on earth than heaven. And yet, the solution he offers is not a rejection of work or a separation of the “worldly” from the “spiritual” but a redeemed approach to work. Indeed, he argues that **when we strip everyday work of its intended Kingdom value, we are in fact more likely to encourage separation from God**, and thereby make selfishness, laziness or overwork and greed much more likely. Sloppiness and excess come not from the task of work but from work stripped of its meaning and our sinful attempts to restore meaning apart from God and his designs.

When we rightly see “ordinary” work as a central part to how God has made us and how God calls us to join him, partner with him and reflect his image, all kinds of good things happen. Cosden ends his work with a call to a richer and truer understanding of “spirituality” and “mission.” (Personally, I am not sure that either of these terms can be redeemed though I have more hope for the word “spiritual” than I do “mission.”) Cosden’s basic argument is a good one: we must give the world a better picture of what a spiritual life is all about, and we must give them a fuller picture of who and what God’s mission - and therefore our mission - is all about. We may not be saved by works, but we are clearly saved **for** something more than what the body of Christ is currently advertising.

Review by Dean Storelli
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As mentioned above, NT Wright’s Surprised by Hope is an excellent resource for exploring God’s plans for humanity and life on earth. In this work and others, he urges us to look at the resurrection more seriously. His sermon, “Shipwreck and Kingdom: Acts and the Anglican Communion” (available with many other papers and messages online at ntwrightpage.com) is just one example.

Another writer I am familiar with, Michael Frost, has also written extensively about the need for a less divided view of the world. Some of his books that touch on this topic: Seeing God in the Ordinary, Exiles and The Shaping of Things to Come (written with Alan Hirsch).

Other books that deal more directly with the topic of work:

- Your Work Matters to God - written in 1987, this book has been called “a Magna Carta of freedom for the ordinary person who wants all of life to count for God.” Part I overviews competing views of work. Part II develops an integrated, Biblical view of work and Part III works out implications of this view.
- David Hegeman’s Plowing in Hope does an excellent job outlining the Biblical basis of God’s plan to move us from a “splendid garden” to a “glorious city.”
- The Gift of Work is an insider’s view of working out what it means to “work for God” in the marketplace. In the back are three very rich appendixes, one by Dallas Willard and two others that can be found online at <http://books.google.com>: Unto This Last, which explores “the true functions of a merchant,” and “Business-A Profession,” which seeks to redefine success in business and gives some fascinating examples.