



# WORK, CO-CULTIVATION, & REST

BY CHRIS PARKER

## INTRODUCTION

It can be well argued that school and learning are not merely about preparation for after school. God is glorified, and His Kingdom plans unveiled, when we learn about Him through His world; learning that is shaped by the gospel of the Lord Jesus can be an end in itself! This notion is explored more fully in other places in this edition. In this article, I explore the part of the purpose of school that is about after school. Could it be that the perceptions held by many students within Christian schools about the nature of this preparation are not only at odds with a biblical view but are so counter to this view that they can significantly work against the attempts of Christian education to instil a way of life and understanding that is shaped by the gospel? If a student's view of the purpose of school is that it is merely a preparation for personal success in job and career, then she will be seeking all opportunities to look around the sides of the biblical lens being presented, to see her learning through a pragmatic focal point.

Any discussion about the purpose of school, and what school is preparing young people for, inevitably raises the notion of work. However, in this article I would also like to explore some of the assumptions that lie underneath this notion through questions like: What is work? Why do we work? Is work a good thing? Should Christians work even if they don't need to? Why is work so hard sometimes? Where does vocation and calling fit within a Christian perspective of work? What is rest?

Once we explore these questions as Christians, we can then consider the effectiveness of current schooling to not only equip our young people for life after school, but in shaping in them a biblical view of their work in the world and hence the purpose of school in their life.

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## LIVE TO WORK OR WORK TO LIVE?

I remember a TV commercial when I was younger—I think it was for a particular brand of ute—where the young man throws his tool box into the back of his ute and says (picture high vis shirt, burley bloke, cattle dog at feet), "I don't live to work, I work to live!" The inference being that if you buy one of these utes it will help you achieve this noble pursuit. It wasn't until many years later, and after a Copernican type conversion to Christianity at age 18, that I began to question this pop philosophy. I grew up within a culture, both societal and family, that taught me that work was primarily two things; an individualised means to an end for 'putting food on the table', and a vehicle for defining who and where each individual fits in society's hierarchical structures. This was especially the case for the 'professional' jobs where the notion of career became a means of self-identity, self-fulfilment, and even self-salvation.

It was when I became involved with a Christian school community a few years later that I developed a more thoroughly biblical, and therefore holistic, view of life and work. We have a vocation as Christians; we are called by God to tasks that are distinctly ours as humans. We flourish as humans when we acknowledge that we have been created by God, in His image, to bring glory to Him. We bring Him glory when we faithfully fulfil our role as stewards of the physical creation, the cultural creation, and of the gospel of His coming Kingdom—a Kingdom of redemption and restoration where Jesus Christ is Lord.

When work is considered this way—expanded to all human doing, is less about self-identity and more about God's glory—we begin to see that it is distinctively Christian to see work as good. Work is not punishment or a necessary evil as a consequence of the fall; God's original perfect design, as expressed in the Garden of Eden, has humans working and flourishing through this work. In Genesis 2:15 we see humans given the role of cultivating the garden, "to work it and take care of it". The Bible also shows us a God who works. He clearly works when He brings something out of nothing to form the cosmos and although He rests in satisfaction when this is completed, the Bible is clear that He continues His sovereign work of second by second sustaining the creation (your next breath is the work of God's hand). God sees work as good and an integral part of creation. He commissions humans as co-cultivators in this noble venture. There is a sense in which we "live to work" as humans and this is honourable, fulfilling, and good.

So whether splicing a gene or doing brain surgery or collecting the rubbish or painting a picture, our work further develops, maintains or repairs the fabric of the world. In this way, we connect our work to God's work. (Keller, 2012)

Work is an expression of our dignity as humans by being one of the expressions of our in-Himness. To this end we don't see any hierarchy of different types of work in the Scriptures. All work has dignity whether you are involved with oncology research, ditch digging, scraping gunk out of nappies, or

formulating theological truth. To think otherwise is to continue to be shaped by the dualism of Ancient Greek philosophy where Plato and his pals established that work of the mind was pure and noble but manual work was demeaning. Culturally, we in the West have had trouble shaking off this assumption. This is why we all find ourselves answering (and asking) the question “what do you do?” in social settings; too often it is driven out of a desire to establish a hierarchy of contribution-importance and comparative value. Are we teaching our students a full view of work such that they will be adults who will redeem this cultural social setting and ask far more creative questions that are both God and human honouring?

No task is too small a vessel to hold the immense dignity of work given by God. Simple physical labour is God’s work no less than the formulation of theological truth. (Keller, 2012)

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## **DISTORTION OF THE GOOD DESIGN**

However, this perfected view of human-doing is not always what we find. Many children around the world find themselves in demeaning child labour. The pervasive commodification view of life results in human trafficking and women being owned and traded as sex slaves. In the developing world millions of workers sit on assembly lines doing robotic jobs for minimum wage. For some, the extent of their human-doing is to continually beg for mere survival. How could this be God’s perfect design? We also recognise that even when we find ourselves

engaged in tasks and jobs that are not demeaning by nature, our pursuits are still tainted by a sense of fruitlessness and at times profound frustration.

If all human work is good by God’s design, why does it seem that it comes with so much guilt and striving, fear and shame, and a tonne of toil? This is what God indicated to Adam would happen as a result of humanity’s rebellion and independence; expulsion from the perfect garden and into a world with distortions and decay. Work and human doing is still good by design but the decay is ever-present, shadowing all that we attempt to do. Being involved in church leadership, cutting the oranges for a child’s soccer team, working part-time as a shop assistant or full-time as a bank manager, making ukuleles as a hobby, are all good but they now have their frustrations and toil as well as their ever-present potential for idolatry through striving for recognition, approval, security, and a sense of individual salvation.

Our students are well aware of the brokenness of work and human-doing. They live with their parents and their struggles with their jobs, they see the TV commercials suggesting work is merely a means

to an end and they see, and to some extent live with, their teachers’ frustrations and toil as they navigate working in a school community. Without an alternative being presented, what view of work does this exposure create? If work is always going to be crappy and is ultimately about self-fulfilment and worth, then I better make sure I strive for the best paid and highest status job I can. Or alternatively, it’s all just too much; I will never succeed in this game anyway, so I’ll just give up.

## **WORK REDEEMED**

Our view of purpose in life is always shaped by some big picture story that we are living out of; whether we are aware of the narrative influence or not. We have explored how the dominant

cultural storytelling around work for us in Australia is shaped by individualism, humanism, consumerism, and even Darwinism (survival of the fittest). However, not only do we as Christians obtain our purpose and meaning from the biblical narrative but Christian education seeks to teach its students a way of life and understanding that is framed solely by this biblical narrative. This worldview has an extremely optimistic and hopeful view of work this side of the cross. God had/has a plan to deal with the decay and the distortion of the fall and He seeks to involve us (and our students!) in this grand plan of the redemption of all things.

God has blessed human kind with the task of cultivating the creation. Combined with His role of provider and sustainer, we are then, in a sense, co-cultivators with Him. He is ushering in a new Kingdom. A Kingdom where Jesus is both king and the “first fruits” of the redeemed new order. The Christian is then seeking to serve both the King and the establishment of His Kingdom as well as serving others through all that they do as humans. Christians see their involvement with music, family, learning, paid work, preaching, coaching, and writing as an opportunity to serve God and bring Him glory as co-cultivators and co-redeemers. The biblical story of life has hope in the form of self-sacrifice but our dominant cultural story is founded on a false hope in the form of self-service and self-salvation through what we do and achieve.

A Christian perspective on work is a big perspective; full of hope, full of purpose, full of the goodness of God that provides sustenance and resilience when decay makes the task ache. Do our students in our Christian schools have this big view of work? How does it shape their view of the purpose of school?

Think of the gospel as a set of glasses through which you “look” at everything else in the world. Christian artists, when they do this faithfully, will not be completely beholden either to profit or to naked self-expression; and they will tell the widest variety of stories. Christians in business will see profit



as only one of several bottom lines; and they will work passionately for any kind of enterprise that serves the common good. The Christian writer can constantly be showing the destructiveness of making something besides God in to the central thing, even without mentioning God directly. (Keller, 2012)

## OUR STUDENTS AND GRADUATES

I suspect that the question of the purpose of school in the mind of the student is fundamental to the success of Christian education. If a student consciously, or subconsciously, believes that they are at school to become equipped for the best job possible then this belief will shape the way they learn. There will always be a pragmatic undercurrent shaping the exploration of the things of God's world. A biblical worldview shaped curriculum will either be tolerated or it may be embraced but with a subconscious dualism being nurtured.

A crucial question for Christian teachers to discuss and explore is, "how can we at the same time as teaching a biblical worldview through subjects, be shaping a full and rich biblical view of work (and the purpose of school) in our students so that their view of work and school is not undoing our efforts towards a Christ-centred worldview?" I am aware that a holistic, all-of-life Christian education will speak into the issue of work and the purpose of school. However, are we assuming that this will be grasped by our students or do we need to be more deliberate and intentional in this venture? Following this article is a selection of the results of a survey of students in three Christian schools. They were asked to quickly write down their response to a series of questions around the purpose of school. You might be shocked by the data. Maybe we need to be more deliberately exploring the question about what our graduates, or soon to be graduates, might be asking about themselves in determining what they will do with the paid work part of their lives after school. Certainly in some schools in

Australia the question might be in the form, "what job will make me the most money and give me the most status?" Perhaps in our Christian schools the question is not quite so blatant and crass. However, would this form of the same question be just as possible, "what job will give me a reasonable pay level and good job security and not too much stress so that I can live a comfortable life?" Perhaps we should be deliberately training our future graduates to ask, "how, with my current gifts, skills, and opportunities can I be of greatest service to others and the Lord Jesus by working with Him in His grand plan to redeem all things and establish his Kingdom in Christ?"

## WHAT ABOUT REST?

The motif of work that runs all through Scripture is coupled with that of rest. This is especially seen, "in the beginning". If we are to be making sure that we shape in our students a biblical view of work, then we must also do the same for rest. We could state the biblical mandate for rest and we could have training sessions on techniques to relax and we could unfold for them some of the helpful cultural dialogues about work-life balance etc. However, the Bible offers us a much deeper insight into rest. The unfolding narrative of the Bible begins by laying before us the notion of a Sabbath rest; a cyclic ceremonial rest that at every point seems to be hinting at a deeper more complete rest to come. We then have the seemingly mysterious words of Jesus claiming to be the Lord of the Sabbath rest and a suggestion that He is the source of ultimate rest (Matthew 12:8).

I suspect Jesus was referring to the second type of work—or restlessness—from which humans suffer; the work of the inner machinery that is constantly grinding away internally. The inner anxious machinery and churning that is working to develop a self-identify and sense of self-worth. This inner restlessness seeks to create a sense of perceived value and respect by what we do and who we are. For some of us (and not in the least, our teenagers) this is a constant draining and, at

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times, debilitating work that makes all the other work we attempt so much more fraught and toilsome. In fact this under-work can be the reason why we can sometimes feel so unrested after resting. Until this inner machinery is shut down, all rest will be merely a surface attempt at rejuvenation.

However, when we see Jesus on the cross we see the fulfilment of His claim to be the Lord of the Sabbath and ultimate rest. Here we see Jesus crying, writhing, calling out; we are in fact seeing infinite restlessness on our behalf so that Jesus can ultimately say, "it is finished, and it is good". Because of Jesus, God now looks at us and can say "it is good", and we can now have rest—deep rest of the soul—because the anxious under-work of self-identity, self-fulfilment, and self-salvation is finished. We are now united with Christ and the under-work has been dealt with. "Come to me all you who are weary and burdened and I will give you rest." (Matthew 11:28)

Our task—or is it a blessing?—as Christian educators, is to equip our students for life after school with a full biblical view of life, work, and of where true rest is to be found.

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### Reference

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