

Beyond paying bills on time, being nice to staff and having finances to support Christian ministry, what more is there to work for the Christian business owner?

By Steve Parker

It seems that many Christian business owners do not operate their business's as if there is more, if even they are able to do all these three.¹ To be fair, business is tough and it's easy to end up chasing one's tail paying bills, following up invoices, organising staff, keeping on top of workflow and doing all that needs to be done. But that is also true of other parts of our lives and yet we don't let the busyness be the final word, we strive for what should be (eg: parenting, exercise, spiritual disciplines, etc). But as a second concession, there is not a lot of guidance from the average local church for business owners. So what should business be like, if it were on the front foot? What more is there more to work than paying bills on time, being nice to staff and being able to support a Christian ministry?

The short answer is that there is much more, work has enormous intrinsic value; it is a matter of human dignity, it displays the nature of God and thereby brings Him glory. Moreover, through our work we fulfill his explicit will for our lives and become a means by which He provides for and nurtures His world. But short answers need longer answers to both back them up and show how they are applied to the real world. This longer answer needs to begin with locating where this intrinsic value of work comes from and for that we must turn to Genesis 1 and 2.

The first thing to notice is that man was made in the image and likeness of God and that one of the clearest things we see about God in the preceding verses (ie; all the way up to the start of the book) is that God is a worker.² He is a creator, a bringer-out-of-nothing-er. That we would be like that too; creating things, bringing forth things yet unseen (innovation), working, was inevitable... that humans work is a reflection of our design. To co-opt a famous line from the first letter of John; we design because He first designed us. Our work is a key component of what it means to be human. Indeed, modern psychology recognises that having something to contribute is a matter of human dignity and wellbeing.³ Being a business owner – bringing something of value to the market – therefore carries a great amount of dignity, what could be called “healthy” pride. Now that is some intrinsic value “right thur”.

But that we work is also a display of the nature of God. Now when a created thing displays its creator that display serves to make much of its creator – as statues make much of the person they are made in the image of. “Making much of” means to elevate, to exalt, and... to glorify. Our work displays something of the nature of God and thereby glorifies Him. The Westminster Catechism claims very boldly that “the chief end of man is to glorify God and enjoy him forever,” we can now say that our work is one of the key ways that we do this. Especially when it is done well, done in love and done for the good of all.⁴ Our work makes a part of the invisible God visible (more on that later)... the intrinsic value points just got doubled.

Hot on the heels of the creation-of-man verses we read that he has been made for a purpose; the cultural mandate (Gen 1:28) was God's “what to do now” briefing. Humans were instructed to rule, subdue, have dominion over and fill God's newly created. Given the state of creation at the time (unfinished, Gen 2:5) this essentially meant to carry on the process of creation; whereby through our work we would “extend the garden.” It is called the cultural mandate because as humans would increase to fill the earth, specialize in their work, and come up with all sorts of ways of helping one another extend the garden, we would create culture.⁵ And so we note that work was ordained by God before the fall – it is part of what God called “good” and that as humans work, they are fulfilling God's will for them. This is a significant point given how many Christians ache to know more about what God's will for their life is.

¹ Scott Rae (in *The Ethics of Business*) identifies a strong trend in Christian business owners to live in a state of dualism – two different sets of ethics; one for Christianity, the other for business.

² All of the works I have read about the theology of work begin here.

³ For example; *Wellbeing* by Tom Rath.

⁴ Tim Keller (*Every Good Endeavour*) argues that one “even non-Christian” work glorifies the true creator.

⁵ see Andy Crouch, *Culture Making* for a much fuller mapping out of this.

It is also important to observe that as humanity was going to fill the earth and fulfill the mandate it would have a growing demand for its basic needs; food, water, shelter, clothing, etc. Moreover, because of the benefits of specialization and economies of scale, that humans should form dedicated workplaces to provide a specific one of these needs was always going to happen.⁶ And as mankind would keep growing, the need for supply chains, innovation and further specialization would also keep growing, eventually we would even need a sales and marketing industry (!). Actually, there are two important observations here... firstly, that specialization was always on the cards. In other words, our modern workplaces were in the mind of God way back in the original cultural mandate – albeit without the effects of sin. These days many of us do not work in an industry directly related our basic needs (food, water, shelter, etc) – but this doesn't mean our work is not important to God or humanity. Second, our helping one another with greater and greater specialization is actually an extension of God helping us. This observation was first really emphasized by reformer Martin Luther as he expounded Psalms 145 and 147; God has promised to sustain His creation and how humans provide for one another through their work is a key part of his way of doing so. Tim Keller in *Every Good Endeavour* also takes up this argument and makes clear that this is the other side of our cultural mandate; through our work God is fulfilling his promise to care and nurture his world.

So by now “work” should have quite a lot of intrinsic value points. To summarise, so far we have that;

- Being able to work – to contribute something of value – is central to what it means to be human.⁷
It is a matter of human dignity
- It displays the nature of God and thereby brings Him glory
We are made in His likeness - we design because he first designed us. The more that our work is excellent, the more that it is done in love, and the more that it is done for others the better.
- By working we are fulfilling God's explicit will for us
To those who want to know God's will for them; it is that you would work.
- By our work God keeps His promises to care and nurture for his world
Our work to provide for one another is an extension of the work of God.

But what about The Fall...?

Well yes, that does muddle things a bit, obviously there are bunch of professions that could never be counted as God glorifying no matter how “excellent” they were (take slave trading for example). There is much to say about how the Fall changes things but here I will direct our attention to the point that even in a fallen world, the cultural mandate still stands; we are still meant to rule, subdue, have dominion and fill the earth... We are still called to fulfill our purpose to work and create [good and right] culture. Actually, mankind has continued with the mandate but tragically so – in a sin-broken way. This harm needs to be undone and put right, and as a consequence we now have new and more work to do of a redemptive kind. A significant part of our day to day life as Christians is to be dedicated to fulfilling our cultural mandate properly; in the manner exemplified by our Christ rather than our sin-broken default.⁸ We are ambassadors of a kingdom that is coming, we are an advance party spreading God's love and good will for man. Our sanctification journey is not just so that we would sin less, but also that we would do more “good works.” Interestingly, lay Christians have often asked a similar question to the one introducing this article namely; “what more is there to the Christian life past going to church, not swearing and trying to be nice to your neighbour?” The answer is; fulfill your cultural mandate properly – do great work; do it with excellence, do it in love, do it to serve others and... do it on purpose to glorify God.

⁶ And indeed it happened quite quickly; in the second generation of man, Cain was a gardener while Able tended sheep.

⁷ This is an overarching statement encompassing all of humanity and so can remain true even when an individual cannot make a contribution (from disability, illness, age, etc). Indeed, not being able to contribute is part of what makes these situations so difficult.

⁸ This point deserves a lot more fleshing out. There is much to say about the difference between ruling, subduing, having dominion and filling the earth in the Christ-like way to the sin-broken way. See NT Wright's *After you believe*

And what about the Great Commission, isn't that the central purpose of work?

Sort of. In a sin-broken world we have redemptive work to do that is of ultimate importance. But this work sweeps across everything we do – from parenting and marriage to local sports club membership and 9-5 work. Yes work affords evangelistic opportunities, particularly if it is done well, done in love, etc but this is not the intrinsic value that work itself has, it is not our work's ultimate fulfillment or purpose. Anything that brings you into contact with other humans shares this point of value. To put evangelisation as the central purpose of work will lead to all kinds of workplace mishaps that will in turn undermine our witness, and indeed this has happened far too often.

The authentic way to evangelise through work is first to do a good job of whatever you are doing (parenting, marriage, work, etc) – or at least be seen to be trying to do a good job. And obviously, the better you understand what you are doing, the better you are set up to do a good job. For this discussion, this amounts to a call to Christian business owners to understand the intrinsic value of work and live out the implications. And yes, because of the situation we're in (ie; a fallen world, post Gen 3), one of those implications is that we aim to be an agent of God's redemptive work as well as his cultural mandative work. But it is a matter of order, the cart never goes well before the horse, but a cart horse without a cart is not fulfilling its proper potential. So this really should not read that the task of evangelism should be locked in the back office until we've got everything right or because the central purpose of work lies elsewhere. The point I'm trying to make here is how evangelise within the work context – with integrity to the original intrinsic value.

Implications...

The implications are significant; first that generally speaking our work has incredible value and this should thereby motivate us. How to make that specifically true for your workplace depends on how much your workplace strives for excellence, does it's work in love, and does it to genuinely serve others (ie; without tricking them into needs that they actually do not have). But finally – and ultimately – that for the Christian business owner, that bringing glory to God through and in the work be done on purpose (remember what the chief end of man is).

Interestingly, amongst leadership and management literature, helping staff see meaning in their work is taught as key to raising staff engagement. The point here is that this is no smoke and mirrors attempt to motivate staff – work really does have meaning. Especially when it is done well, done in love and done for the good of all (yes that sentence has been repeated a fair bit). Furthermore, because of this importance, workplaces should see it as a matter of duty to actively facilitate greater individual and team performance – their work is important and glorifies God. This also is a significant implication; business owners have the incredible privilege of helping God's people (ie; all mankind) fulfill their calling.

Another important implication is that originally there was never meant to be any such thing as "secular" work, it was all ministry. From Adam's gardening to Jesus' carpentry, in a God-based economy it is all helping, it is all serving, it is all ministry. The secular/ministry divide has plagued the church for quite some time, but it was not till Martin Luther came along that anyone had a real go at dismantling it. In his attempt to raise the value of 'secular' work he famously quipped that "the work of a milkmaid is just as important to God as the work of a priest." We need to learn to see the importance of our 'secular' work and business owners need to lead the way with that.

But probably the most jarring implication is that work's highest end is to fulfill its core service promise (ie; the way it helps mankind), and not to make a profit.⁹ This is in direct contrast with what is taught in business schools; the Friedman doctrine is that the chief end of business is to maximize shareholder value. But we must not belittle the place of profit either because without it we won't be able to offer our service next year or improve our service offer. Perhaps an analogy would help make clear the place of profit; without enough fuel a car will not make it to its given destination. But fuel is not why you are driving to that destination. It would be irresponsible to set out on the journey without enough fuel to arrive – one needs to aim and strive for profit – but it would be deceptive to set off for some destination while not really valuing the destination itself but rather the profit (fuel) you will make along the way.

⁹ This is a key thrust of Jeff van Duzer's excellent book *Why Business Matter to God*.

Potentially, the more fuel you have (the more fuel you are able to produce), the more vehicles you can put on the road but let's keep first things first, the reason you would put more vehicles on the road is so that you can help more customers get to the destination(s) you offer. Truly cultural mandate-oriented people are "shrewd" with the profit they make; if they end up with lots of it, they do more and more generous acts of service (Luke 16:1-15). In our world, money really can fuel quite a lot of things – oh the joy in having money to give away (to support Christian ministry or any good cause). That workplaces should emphasize how they serve has become a focus amongst modern marketing guru's but our point here is that it was meant to be that way all along.

Following on from this last point, for Christians work is not a means to an end but an end in itself. We do not work hard so that we can have more money (more fuel) to buy nice stuff, go on nice holidays, or feel more financially secure, we work hard because that is how we get to help people and how we get to glorify God, and doing both of those brings us great joy.

In conclusion, an exhortation to Christian business owners

Firstly, thank you for doing the hard work of owning and running a business. It is not an easy ride; it comes with lots of responsibility and throws many curveballs. Here are my summary pointers for bringing into the here-and-now the intrinsic value of work.

1. Consider how your work helps fulfill the cultural mandate and tell your people.
2. Pursue excellence.
3. Let love reign in your workplace; how you treat your staff, suppliers, and customers. Let it influence your ethics, what products and services you offer, and how genuine you are with your offering.
4. Do what you can to facilitate your people's best – their work is important to both your business and to God.
5. As a workplace dedicated to the cultural mandate, let this emphasis influence how successful you think you are – it's about how well you fulfill your service promise, not how profitable you are.
6. And whatever you do [in and through your workplace], whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, bringing glory to God.

(a verse mash up of 1 Cor 10:31 and Col 3:17)

Finally, be strong and courageous. Do not shrink back from your calling (Heb 10:37-39), do not be discouraged for the LORD your God will be with you (Josh 1:9). Be steadfast, immovable, always trying, and remember that in the Lord your labour is not in vain (1 Cor 15:58).

Author's note:

This topic is of great interest to me since my own work is as a small and medium business advisor and also as a people and productivity advisor.

I write in order to put my thoughts in order. I also hope to be helpful and from my observations it seems help is needed – both how to view our work and what to do after one believes seem to need bolstering in our post-Christian cultural norm. As Hosea lamented; my people perish because of a lack of knowledge (Hos 4:6). The points I've drawn out seem substantial to me but I encourage amicable reproof 😊

Kind regards, Steve.

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