

SELLING WORK

ESSAY: Recovering a Biblical vision for work means seeing it as God created it,

BY DAVID L. BAHNSEN

I BECAME PASSIONATE about the subject of work because of my upbringing—and then sadly enough, because I lost the person responsible for my upbringing: my late father, a Christian intellectual, pastor, and apologist.

My father instilled in me from a very young age a robustly Christian view of work. His angle was not just the traditional teaching on the virtue and character of hard work—something we all should cherish—but also a distinctive view of the kingdom of God that encompasses our work, that views our vocations as a vital part of our purpose on earth.

My father modeled his intense commitment to this thought and practice in his own life, working tirelessly to produce scholarly output, minister to his congregation, and defend the Christian faith ... right up until God took him home at the age of 47.

A lifetime heart condition. At 21, I was not merely heart-broken at the loss of my father, best friend, and mentor. I also found myself purposeless—and penniless. At a true crossroads: Where would my life go?

It was work that God used to bring me a sense of purpose, and this was cathartic in all the healthy ways it should be and could be. But it was also spiritually energizing. The trauma of my loss was reshaped through a healthy outlet, and the existential angst I felt about what to do with my life without my spiritual mentor was channeled into useful activity and productivity. At some point, I realized this was not by accident, but by God's design for His creation—for all of mankind, not merely white-collar professionals with high socioeconomic strata. I've been passionate about work ever since.

AN EXPLOSION OF FAITH and work resources has burst onto the scene over the last 25 years. It is not uncommon for a Christian engaged in some aspect of the marketplace—a business owner, an entrepreneur, an execu-

tive at any echelon of the professional spectrum—to have access to some related resource. For those who have the time and interest, there is likely a breakfast event taking place in their town this month where a few dozen people will gather for coffee and conversation, which will lead into a sit-down breakfast. Likely, a speaker will come and share with the audience the reality of their work mattering to God.

Business cards will change hands, networking will take place, and there may be some follow-up resources made available at the back of the room. And while the message will likely be mostly true, a thoroughly creational understanding of the human person's relationship to work is unlikely to be found.

My critique of the faith and work movement is only marginal in that I admire much of what its leaders are doing to equip God's people in their vocational lives. But the barest of margins sometimes make a pivotal difference, and the deficit I find in this movement stems less from what is said than what is not said.

A dynamic, exciting, comprehensive, and dare I say, Biblical, understanding of work will not be possible as long as the Church's implicit message is rooted to work as transactional: that the value of work lies mainly in what we get in return.

I REALIZE I RISK rubbing people the wrong way. Who could not find value in the transactional benefits of work?

It is the means by which we provide for ourselves and our families. The compensation we receive from our jobs becomes the treasure we share with our churches and other nonprofit organizations we choose to support. Work does contain transactional benefits. However, defining and discussing work strictly in this context leads to the inescapable conclusion that work is like eating spinach—something you don't really want to do but know that it will provide benefits if you suck it up and do it.

The Bible, though, does not start with "if anyone is not willing to work, let him not eat" (2 Thessalonians 3:10). It starts in the Garden of Eden, with God making mankind very good, and

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not as a mere means to an end

tasking him to ... well, work. God made us to be co-creators with Him. He tasked mankind with the special purpose of filling the earth, cultivating it, multiplying, and caring for His garden. The stewardship, rule, cultivation, and creativity mandated in Genesis 1 are rooted to the most important principle in all of Christian anthropology—*imago Dei*. We are made in the image of God, and God Himself was a creator, producer, and innovator.

Here's where some people get off the bus. Yes, yes, they say: Some people are creative and innovative. The rest of us just put in our hours and look forward to the weekend.

But that's not what Scripture says. God did not make just some of mankind capable of productive activity, but rather all of mankind. This intrinsically human dynamic was true from the very outset of creation—that we worship God in our work, and our unique individuality and purpose are manifested in our creative output.

This productivity and creativity are manifested in what we do with our minds, our hands, or both. It is white-collar and blue-collar. It applies across all human endeavor.

BEFORE SIN ENTERED THE WORLD, our very created purpose was connected to the work we do. Many terms that circulate through the creation account, and are part of the Church's lexicon today, are synonymous with work: Being fruitful. Filling the earth. Caring for the garden. Exercising dominion over the world. Stewarding the creation. But consider the ways in which society's message about work, and sometimes even the Church's message, runs counter to this creational message:

- ▶ Presenting work as something we do merely to provide for our families. The implicit message here is that work is a chore and burden, and not a calling with inherent meaning and purpose.

- ▶ Framing work as something you do so that you will not

have to do it anymore, which is the implicit message of the retirement-craze culture.

- ▶ Pitting work against family and even against “ministry,” a dualistic view that divides the kingdom of God into “secular” and “sacred” categories, with the latter superior to the former.

The “work versus family” theme is prevalent in the Church but not in the Word of God. Telling people they are to work and that their work matters, while also suggesting (or saying outright) that too much work is an existential threat against the priority of family is manipulative and counterproductive. Men are told to be providers but then lambasted if they ever miss a kid's soccer practice. Dads who take their work responsibility seriously face “suburban scowls” wherever a professional commitment prevents 100 percent family or school presence. These expectations lack nuance and are inherently unfair.

In truth, a celebration of vocational achievement runs in concert with both the creation mandate and strong families, and it is time for the Church to stop tiptoeing around this message.

WHAT WE ABSOLUTELY do not need more of is borrowing language from the culture about “work-life balance.” God modeled rest for us and gave us the normative commandment to follow His example: Work six days, rest one. The work-rest paradigm is established in Scripture and is a wholly superior concept to so-called work-life balance, implicit in which is the idea that our work and our “lives” are at odds. Our lives and our work are not in conflict, and the idea that they are is distinctly Marxian.

In fact, the work-life balance construct is manufactured to minimize work, as evidenced by the fact that it is the only category of our lives receiving the “balance” nomenclature. How many of you have ever gone to your spouse at the end of the day and said you were unavailable for conversation because you were practicing “marriage-life balance”?

You see? It doesn't hold up. No blessing in our life should crowd out the other blessings, and the wisdom required to manage it all is part of the Christian life. It does not require asking our bosses to institute in-office yoga classes or allow us time with an adult coloring book.

Work is the production of goods and services that meet human needs, and it should never be seen as tedious. It has been a blessing in my life for the same reason it can be and should be a blessing in all our lives: because it gives us an avenue for co-creating with God, serving others, and using our gifts and faculties to grow, build, and steward.

An embedded belief and practice of work as rallying God's intent for humanity is perhaps the most exciting message the Church could rediscover in this era crying out for meaning and purpose. ■

—David L. Bahnsen is the author of *Full-Time: Work and the Meaning of Life* (Post Hill Press 2024) and a frequent contributor to *WORLD Opinions and The World and Everything in It* podcast

A chat with David Bahnsen

On showing up, grouchy bosses, and the (bad) advice to “follow your dreams”

by LYNN VINCENT

→ Having long felt called to my particular work while also answering charges of “working too much,” I read with relief David L. Bahnsen’s latest book, *Full-Time: Work and the Meaning of Life*. I’d encountered other theologies of work and generally felt they were a little ... well, soft. Bahnsen’s take is more brass tacks, in the same way Scripture often is: Thus it is written, and thus should we do. I asked Bahnsen to elaborate on the essay he wrote for us (p. 86) this issue:

In *Full-Time: Work and the Meaning of Life*, you sound the alarm about the labor force participation rate among

American teens and young adults, ages 16 to 24. Tell us about that. Fewer 16- to 24-year-olds working means fewer 25- to 35-year-olds working, and certainly means less skill, confidence, readiness, and discipline for those in their mid-20s. Teenage jobs, college jobs, part-time jobs—these kinds of endeavors so many of us had are not merely valuable for the work they represent in the moment, but the hand they play in preparing young people for future employment of even greater consequence. Learning how to show up on time, to get along with a grouchy boss, to cooperate with co-workers, to overcome obstacles at some level—these are the traits in our jobs as 16- to 24-year-olds that we carry with us to future jobs.

Apart from the economic effects, what are young people—and we as a society—losing because of this trend? We are losing discipline, intentionality, an appreciation of service, and the concept of delayed gratification. So much of the reason we have fewer college students working part-time jobs in school is that they have rolled their spending-money needs into their student loans. This is essentially just taking a credit card advance to live off of instead of working. It distorts rational economic decision-making and is habit-forming, but not the good kind of habits.



A message to young people we often hear is “follow your dreams.” How has that cliché worked its way into our economy, and what does Scripture have to say about this subject?

One of the reasons people can get away with saying something like “follow your dreams” is because the miracle of free enterprise has, indeed, enabled more and more people to achieve their dreams. However, there is a chicken-or-egg fallacy at play here. No one ever says “follow your dreams” unless they are already rich. So, do people who find professional fulfillment start by following their dreams, or do their dreams become what they are good at?

In other words, are young people wiser to “follow their skills,” and find themselves in a productive and joyful place because we tend to end up really liking what we’re good at? I believe the Scriptures reinforce this message all the time, with a focus on our talents, doing a lot with what we are given, and other such themes of making the most of our resources.

The “follow your dreams” mantra seems to have warped the definition of purpose from a life focused on service to a life focused on self. What can Christians do, individually and corporately, to change that? Well, this really highlights the other great deficiency in “follow your dreams” thinking: It is entirely inward-focused when work is, by definition, outward-focused. Work is the production of goods and services that meet human needs. We have our needs met by meeting the needs of others, and in this process—involving all sorts of potential skills, interests, studies, activities, and so forth—we find purpose.

Wrap up by recommending for us three books on economics for people like me, who think we’re allergic to economics.

There’s No Free Lunch: 250 Economic Truths by yours truly; *Economics in One Lesson* by Henry Hazlitt; *Basic Economics* by Thomas Sowell. ■