

JESUS AND WORK:
THE ROLE OF WORK AND VOCATION IN THE GOSPELS

by
David Stiles

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ABSTRACT

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David Stiles

The nature of work and labor relations in our world is rapidly changing. For Christians encountering these major changes today, it is important to ask the question, “*What can be learned about work from the Gospels, and specifically, in the teaching of Jesus?*” My assertion is that much can be learned about work and vocation from the Gospels and that Jesus’ teaching in the Gospels is significant in understanding a theology of work for contemporary Christians.

At present, however, a number of scholars seem to agree that very little can be learned about work in the Gospels. After briefly looking at these contemporary views this thesis first explores the Hebrew understanding of work in the Old Testament, viewing specific passages in the Old Testament and then making general conclusions about vocational language used in the Old Testament by exploring work as:

- a gift from God
- a reflection of the Fall
- service to God and
- the Lord’s deliverance from toil.

Next, the thesis analyzes the Greco-Roman understanding of work by reviewing passages from Classical writers as well as contemporary social scientific historians exploring the role of mythic genealogy as the source of work as well as the widespread belief in

chance/luck. For further background, the thesis briefly explores Inter-testamental/Rabbinic sources to understand trade and work in the time of Jesus. I will also examine the trades despised during the time of Christ in order to identify later if Jesus reflected the views of his contemporaries.

The majority of the thesis studies several selected passages as well as the general use of vocational language in the Gospels and examines the work of Christ prior to and during His public ministry and the parables of Christ and His teaching on work.

The thesis next reviews the historic debate on the Theology of Work (in comparison to Jesus' teaching in the Gospels), by analyzing the views on vocation from Church History (including Early Church views, teaching from the Reformation period, the Puritans and other Reformed views, and contemporary views) as they relate to the Gospel's teaching on the doctrine of work.

The thesis also examines the use of the Gospels in Modern theologies of work and concludes with a summary of Jesus' teaching on work in the Gospels.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

LXX	Septuagint (Greek translation of Hebrew Bible)
NT	New Testament
OT	Old Testament

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION TO THE PROBLEM

The nature of work and labor relations in our world is rapidly changing. According to Juliet B. Schor, the annual hours individuals worked in their occupations rose by an annual average of 163 hours from 1969 to 1987.¹ As a result, “half the population now says they have too little time for their families” because of work.²

In recent years, technology and globalization (the access to global markets and issues with global competition) have changed the way many businesses operate. With changes to business models and the use of computerized systems, profound changes have occurred in the workplace. These changes have been so dramatic, according to economists Michael Piore and Charles Sabel, western countries are going through what they term a “second industrial divide.”³

Questions about work have existed for many centuries. In addition to ancient writers addressing this subject, many modern thinkers have developed systems to understand mankind’s relationship to work, including Adam Smith, Karl Marx, Max Weber, Emile Durkheim, and many others.

¹ Juliet B. Schor, *The Overworked American: The Unexpected Decline of Leisure* (New York: Basic Books, 1992), 29.

² *Ibid.*, 11.

³ Michael J. Piore and Charles F. Sabel, *The Second Industrial Divide: Possibilities for Prosperity* (New York: Basic Books, 1984), 207.

With major changes occurring in the marketplace today and with many conflicting opinions regarding the nature of work, it is important for Christians to ask the question, “What does the Bible say about work?” More specifically, the question addressed in this thesis is: “*What can be learned about work from the Gospels, and specifically, in the teaching of Jesus?*”

At present, a number of biblical scholars contend that very little can be learned about work in the Gospels. Alan Richardson states that “not a great deal is said about man’s working life in the New Testament.”⁴ Similarly, Miroslav Volf explains that the New Testament “makes no fundamental affirmations about the meaning of human work.”⁵ Otto Piper states, “On the whole...the New Testament has little to say about work.”⁶ Goren Agrell, in his examination of work, looks at only one passage from the Gospels (eight are from other NT sources).⁷ And *The Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, a work examining a host of topics related to the Gospels, contains no articles bearing the title “work,” “workers,” or even “carpenter,” nor are there any references to those subjects in the index.⁸

My assertion, however, is that much can be learned from the Gospels in formulating a theology of work for contemporary Christians. Therefore, in this thesis I will explore the significance of work in the Gospels, and specifically in the teaching of Jesus. First, to provide a background to the study in the Gospels, I will explore the role of work and vocation in the Old Testament (OT), examining specific material and reaching some general conclusions.

⁴ Alan Richardson, *The Biblical Doctrine of Work* (London: SCM, 1952), 30.

⁵ Miroslav Volf, *Work in the Spirit: Toward a New Theology of Work* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 77.

⁶ Otto A. Piper, “The Meaning of Work” *Theology Today* 14 (July 1957): 175. Piper adds that work “did not occupy a central place in the thinking of the early Christians.”

⁷ Goren Agrell, *Work Toil and Sustenance*, Stephen Westerholm trans. (Forlag, Sweden: Verbum, 1976).

⁸ Joel B. Green, Scot McKnight and I Howard Marshall eds. *The Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*. (Downers Grove, Il.: InterVarsity, 1992.) In addition the word τέκτων (*tekton*), the Greek word for carpenter, does not appear in any articles in the dictionary.

Then I will examine the extra-biblical background to the Gospels, including Greco-Roman and Intertestamental/Rabbinic views of work. Next, I will analyze the Gospel information itself, including Jesus' own work practices and his parabolic teaching, along with other specific passages. Then I will compare Paul's teaching on work with that of the Gospels. I will then examine the historic debate on the theology of work in comparison to the teaching of the Gospels (including Early Church, Reformation, and Modern views on vocation). Lastly, I will wrap up my thesis with some general conclusions regarding Jesus' teaching on work in the Gospels.

CHAPTER 2: THE OLD TESTAMENT VIEW OF WORK

Vocational Language in the Old Testament

Language regarding work and labor permeates every book of the OT. In some books, work is a major theme (explaining the work of God’s people in both agrarian and specific sacerdotal activities) while in other books the role of work plays a more peripheral role. In some books, human work even provides an analogy or metaphor for the work of the Lord. For the purposes of this thesis (as space does not allow for a detailed description of every occurrence) it will be necessary to briefly summarize the role of work in the OT and then examine general conclusions regarding the role of work in the OT.

The Pentateuch (Genesis through Deuteronomy) identifies many individuals by their vocation. For example, Abel was a “keeper of sheep” and Cain “a tiller of the ground” (Gen. 4:2).¹ Lawrence Boadt observes that throughout the Pentateuch, these two methods, “raising food through farming and tending flocks,” were the two most common sources of labor in ancient Israel.² In addition, the Pentateuch states that:

Table 2.1. Vocational Descriptions in the Pentateuch

Name	Vocational Description
Jabal	was “the ancestor of those who live in tents and have livestock.” (Gen. 4:20)
Tubalcain	“made all kinds of bronze and iron tools.” (Gen. 4:22)

¹ Unless noted, all biblical references in this paper will be from: *The Holy Bible, New International Version* (NIV), copyright 1973, 1978, 1984, 2010 by Biblica, Inc.; all rights reserved worldwide; used by permission.

² Lawrence Boadt, *Reading the Old Testament: An Introduction* (New York: Paulist, 1984), 253.

Name	Vocational Description
Nimrod	was “a mighty hunter.” (Gen. 10:9)
Abraham	was “very rich in livestock,” while his nephew Lot had “flocks and herds and tents.” (Gen. 13:2 and 13:4)
Esau	was “a skillful hunter, a man of the fields,” while Jacob was “a quiet man, living in tents.” (Gen. 25:27)
Isaac	“planted crops” and was envied by the Philistines because “he had so many flocks and herds and servants.”(Gen. 26:12 and 14)
Jacob	worked fourteen years to get his wife. (Gen. 26:18)
Bezalel	was filled with the “knowledge of every kind of craft, to devise artistic designs, to work in gold, silver, and bronze in cutting stones for setting, and in carving wood, in every kind of craft.” (Exod. 31:3-4)

The historical books of the OT (Joshua through Esther) also contain many passages regarding work and vocation. For example:

Table 2.2. Vocational Descriptions in the Historical Books of the OT

Name	Vocational Description
Joshua	made the Gibeonites “hewers of wood and drawers of water for all the congregation.” (Josh. 9:21)
Sampson’s father	was interested in the work that his son would do. (Judg. 13:12)
Ruth	gleaned “in the field behind the reapers.” (Ruth 2:3)
David	kept his family’s sheep. (1 Sam. 16:11)

Name	Vocational Description
Prostitutes	sought Solomon’s wisdom. (1 Kings 3:16)
Sidonians	were known as the best at cutting timbers. (1 Kings 5:6)
Hiram	was a craftsmen in bronze. (1 Kings 7:14)
Solomon	had “seventy thousand laborers and eighty thousand stonecutters.” (1 Kings 5:15)
Carpenters, builders, masons and stonecutters	worked on the temple of the Lord. (2 Kings 12:12)
“some of the poorest people of the land”	“were left “to be vinedressers and tillers of the soil” after the defeat of Judah. (2 Kings 25:12)
Huram-Abi	was “a man of great skill ... trained to work in gold and silver, bronze and iron, stone and wood, and with purple and blue and crimson yarn and fine linen ... experienced in all kinds of engraving and can execute any design given to him.” (2 Chron. 2:13-14)

The Poetic books (Job through the Song of Solomon) also contain many passages regarding work and vocation, including the following:

Table 2.3. Vocational Descriptions in the Poetic Books of the OT

Name	Vocational Description
Satan	explained that Job’s “flocks and herds are spread throughout the land.” (Job 1:10)
The heavens	are described as the “work” of the Lord’s fingers. (Ps. 8:3)
A Proverb	teaches: “prepare your work outside, get everything ready for you in the field; and after that build your house.” (Prov. 24:27)

The Major and Minor Prophets (Isaiah through Malachi) also contain many passages regarding work and vocation. For example:

Table 2.4. Vocational Descriptions in the Major and Minor Prophets of the OT

Name	Vocational Description
Skilled artisans, metalworkers and goldsmiths	created idols. (Isa. 40:19-20 and Jer. 10:3-9)
The Lord	is described as a “potter” and His people “the clay.” (Isa. 27:12-25)
Commerce	is described in trading silver, iron, tin and lead, horses, mules, ivory tusks, ebony, turquoise, embroidered work, fine linen, coral rubies, honey, olive oil, balm, wine, wrought iron, lambs, rams, goats, spices, precious stones and choice garments. (Ezek. 27:12-25)
Idols	were made of silver “all of them the work of craftsmen.” (Hosea 13:2)
The Lord	declared that the days are coming “when the reaper will be overtaken by the plowman and the planter by the one treading grapes.” (Amos 9:13)
The Lord	asked, “If grape pickers came to you, would they not leave a few grapes?” (Obad. 1:5)
Zerubbabel, Joshua and the whole remnant of the people	worked on the House of the Lord. (Hag. 1:14)

Significance of Work and Labor in the Old Testament

Scholars in the field of comparative religion point out that the inclusion of work and vocation in the OT is not unique among ancient religions and civilizations. Egyptian myths describe the creation of work, while other ancient Egyptian documents describe commerce, craftsmen, the building of houses and pyramids, farmers plowing and workers with cattle, grain, land, and plunder.¹ Mesopotamian writings refer to brick workers, hunters, shepherds, and merchants.² In Hittite writings, the raising of sheep, cattle, and grain are described.³ And in Ugaritic works, silversmiths, goldsmiths, and fishermen are mentioned.⁴ Thus, it was not uncommon for ancient peoples to refer to work in their religious documents.

For those who believe in the religious authority of Scripture, however, what is important is not just that vocational language was used in the OT, but the important theological concepts about God and His people that are associated with work and vocation in the OT.

Work as a Gift from God

Many passages in the OT describe work as *a gift* from God. As J. I. Packer explains, “the Jews had a high regard for manual work and a deep respect for those who did it well, whose ability was sometimes at any rate seen as a gift of God’s spirit.”⁵

In Genesis 1:28-30, after he was created, Adam was commanded by God to:

¹ James B. Pritchard, *The Ancient Near East Vol. I: An Anthology of Texts and Pictures* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1958). See specifically creation of work (p. 2), land (p. 7), craftsmen and the building of houses/pyramids (p. 11), cattle (p. 12), commerce (p. 19), plunder (p. 180-181), plowing (p. 13 and 181).

² *Ibid.*, 38-141. See specifically brick workers (p. 38), hunters (p. 42), shepherds (p. 146), and merchants (p. 147).

³ *Ibid.*, 88-91. See specifically sheep and cattle (p. 88), grain (p. 89), making bread (p. 90).

⁴ *Ibid.*, 99.

⁵ J. I. Packer, “Tekton,” *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*: 279.

Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.’ God said ‘See I have given you every plant yielding seed that is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit; you shall have them for food. And to every beast of the earth, and to every bird of the air, and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food” And it was so.⁶

Although this passage does not specifically mention the word *work*, it implies that Adam was to work to carry out his tasks.

A more explicit statement is made in Genesis 2:15, which states that “The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to *till it and keep it.*”

Both of these passages reflect the view that “God had made provision for his creatures” and that Adam must till the land for the food.⁷ The Hebrew word translated as *till* is ‘*abhad*—a common word used for work or labor in the OT.⁸

Not only does Adam work, but Genesis 2:2-3 describes work as something that God also does, “on the seventh day *God finished the work that he had done*, and he rested on the seventh day from all the *work* he had done. So God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it, because on it God rested from all the *work* that he had done in creation” (Gen. 2:2-3, emphasis added).

⁶ *Contra* my position of starting with Creation, Ellul asserts that a theology of work should start instead with the Fall, because in Creation, “All the trees gave their fruit spontaneously, and though Adam was commissioned to watch over the Garden, no enemies threatened him there” (David W Gill, “An Interview with Jacques Ellul,” *Christianity Today* 28 [April 20, 1984]: 20). Similarly, Agrell (*Work Toil*, 29) and Barth (Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, Vol. III, Geoffrey William Bromiley and Thomas Forsyth Torrance, trans [New York: T&T Clark, 1961, Revised Ed. 2001], 152) also claim that in paradise man did not have to work. Supporting my view, Volf explains, however, “The purpose of working in the Garden and keeping it seems to me to be—among other things—providing sustenance. The point of the story is that, in contrast to the time after the fall, man’s work was fruitful, easy and fulfilling” (Miroslav Volf, “On Human Work,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 37 [1984]: 70).

⁷ Howard F. Vos, *Genesis*. Everyman’s Bible Commentary (Chicago: Moody, 1982), 18.

⁸ Francis Brown, S.R. Driver and Charles A. Briggs, *The New Brown-Driver-Briggs-Gesenius Hebrew and English Lexicon* (Peabody, Ma.: Hendrickson, 1979), 712-713.

The Hebrew word used three times for *work* in this pericope is *mēla'khah*—another commonly used word for work in the OT.⁹

It seems significant that two different words (*'abhad* and *mēla'khah*) are used in Genesis to describe work done by Adam and Yahweh. Of interest also is the fact that the LXX uses the word ἔργον (*ergon*) and its derivatives to describe both Hebrew words (thus failing to differentiate between the two).

Work as a gift (and something that God blesses) can be observed in many OT passages:

Table 2.5. Work as a Gift of God in the OT

Description	Passage
“Isaac planted crops in that land and the same year reaped a hundredfold, because the Lord blessed him.”	Gen. 26:12
“Worship the Lord your God, and his blessing will be on your food and water.”	Exod. 23:25
“The Israelites had done all the work just as the Lord had commanded Moses. Moses inspected the work and saw that they had done it just as the Lord had commanded. So Moses blessed them.”	Exod. 39:42-43
“The fruit of your womb will be blessed, and the crops of your land and the young of your livestock—the calves of your herds and the lambs of your flocks. Your basket and your kneading trough will be blessed.”	Deut. 28:4-5

⁹ Francis Brown, S.R. Driver and Charles A. Briggs, *The New Brown-Driver-Briggs-Gesenius Hebrew and English Lexicon* (Peabody, Ma.: Hendrickson, 1979), 521-522. Again Ellul disagrees and argues that Creation was not “work” on God’s part, explaining, “I do not think we can say that Creation was a job, work, for God. The Greeks and Babylonians considered Creation to be an effort. But the Bible says it is the Word rather than work. It is something more simple than work” (Gill, 20).

Description	Passage
In describing Job, Satan explained that God had “blessed the work of his hands.”	Job 1:10
“Restrain your voice from weeping and your eyes from tears, for your work will be rewarded, declares the Lord”	Jer. 31:16
“Do not be afraid, land of Judah; be glad and rejoice. Surely the Lord has done great things! ...The threshing floors will be filled with grain; the vats will overflow with new wine and oil.”	Joel 2:21-24

Work, therefore, was seen as a gift from God as a means by which God *sovereignly provided for* and blessed humanity.

According to Alan Richardson, “The teaching of the OT on the subject of work may be generally summed up by saying that it is regarded as a necessary and indeed God-appointed function of human life.”¹⁰ Richardson notes that the Fourth Commandment, which states, “*six days shalt thou labour,*” is a “statement of fact rather than a command or exhortation, an indicative rather than an imperative.”¹¹ He explains, “The very fact that the Fourth Commandment of the Decalogue is an injunction to rest from labour gives us the clearest possible indication of the biblical point of view that man is by his very nature a worker.”¹² He summarizes, “work is a part of the Creator’s original intention for man in the creation of the world.”¹³

¹⁰ Alan Richardson, *The Biblical Doctrine of Work* (London: SCM, 1952), 23.

¹¹ Ibid., 24.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid., 25.

According to the OT, God's blessing upon His people and the work of their hands will even extend into the new heaven and new earth, as the Lord says in Isaiah:

They will build houses and dwell in them; they will plant vineyards and eat their fruit. No longer will they build houses and others live in them, or plant and others eat. For as the days of a tree, so will be the days of my people; *my chosen ones will long enjoy the work of their hands. They will not labor in vain*, nor will they bear children doomed to misfortune; for *they will be a people blessed by the Lord*. (Isa. 65:21-23, emphasis added)

A Creative Partnership?

Because work is a blessing from God (and God is a creative being), the *communis opinio* of contemporary biblical scholars is that there is a *creative partnership* between God and man. Robert T. Osborn, for example, states, "we find our humanity, our true meaning as God's children, when we take our place as God's partners in giving shape to this earth as context and source of life for all."¹⁴ J. Donald R. De Raadt explains that, "the world is a scenario of creative partnership between God and man where life is mutually enjoyed."¹⁵ James R. Lucas, in explaining "our creative partnership with God" in an "evolving future," writes, "We are a living, breathing extension of God's creative core, and our creative freedom is evidence of his power."¹⁶ Similarly, Volf contends that, "There is a mutual dependence between God and human being in the task of the preservation of creation."¹⁷

¹⁴ Robert T. Osborn, "Work in a Christian Perspective," *Quarterly Review* 5 (1985): 32. Likewise, Rick Warren writes that "Church growth is a partnership between God and man." Rick Warren, *The Purpose Driven Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), 60.

¹⁵ J. Donald R. De Raadt, *A New Management of Life*, p. 14 [online]; available from <http://www.melbournecd.com/pt462/PT462Readings.pdf>; Internet; accessed 2/28/11.

¹⁶ James R. Lucas, *Knowing the Unknowable God: How Faith Thrives on Divine Mystery* (Colorado Springs: Waterbrook, 2003), 99.

¹⁷ Miroslav Volf, "Human Work, Divine Spirit and New Creation: Toward a Pneumatological Understanding of Work," *Pneuma* 9 (1987): 178.

This view of a creative partnership was also expressed by the theologian Martin Buber, his biographer states, “Rather than dependence, Buber speaks of partnership...with the ‘eternal Thou’ that makes possible every meaningful relationship in the world.”¹⁸

I hesitate to draw a similar conclusion from the OT evidence. While it is clear from the OT that humans are dependent upon God in their work, the dependency is not mutual.¹⁹ In fact, Volf’s claim that the “Creator chooses to become ‘dependent’ on the human helping hand” is difficult to defend from the OT evidence.

God, throughout the OT, is described as a *sovereign*, covenantal Lord:

Table 2.6. Descriptions of a Sovereign God in the OT

Description	Passage
“In the Psalms we learn that “our God is in Heaven, he does whatever pleases him.”	Ps. 115:3
The writer of Proverbs explains, “many are the plans in a person’s heart, but it is the Lord’s purpose that prevails.”	Prov. 19:21; <i>C.f.</i> , Isa. 55:11
And even in terms of human work, the Lord says, “they may build, but I will tear down.”	Mal. 1:4

Interestingly, after proposing that the OT view of work describes a mutual “partnership” between God and mankind, Volf qualifies his views by explaining that human

¹⁸ Kenneth Paul Kramer with Mechthild Gawlick. *Martin Buber’s I Thou: Practicing Living Dialogue* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 2003), 137.

¹⁹ Barth also denied the equating of human labor as co-creative with God’s work. He explained that humans are “the final object” of God’s creative activity, not its co-creative vehicle” (Philip West, “Karl Barth’s Theology of Work,” *The Modern Churchman* 30: 13). See also Barth, *Church Dogmatics* (New York: T&T Clark, 1961, Rev. Ed., 2001), 52.

partners need not be aware of their cooperation with God.²⁰

Work as a Reflection of the Fall

In addition to describing work as a blessing, we learn from the Book of Genesis that after Adam disobeyed God his work changed. The implication in the following passage is that work prior to the Fall was pleasurable and easy, but because of the Fall work became difficult for Adam:

And to the man he said, ‘Because you have listened to the voice of your wife, and eaten of the tree about which I commanded you, ‘You shall not eat of it,’ cursed is the ground because of you; in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life; thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you; and you shall eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread until you return to the ground....(Gen. 3:17-19)

The words used in this passage are very different from those previously used in describing work. Work is now described as “toil” (Hebrew *itstsasbhown*).²¹ The ground will still bear fruit as was mentioned in earlier passages; however, because of the Fall, it is now more difficult for Adam (and his descendants) to obtain it.²²

Thus, with the Fall there is a dual nature to work; it is both a reflection of God’s blessing and a reflection of mankind’s Fall. Boadt explains that the OT “views human labor as both a source of blessing (the gift of dominating and caring for the earth) and of curse (the penalty of sin and disobedience renders the task difficult and painful).”²³ H. Flanders, Jr., R. Crapps, and D. Smith have also noted this dualistic nature of work, explaining that

²⁰ Miroslav Volf, *Work in the Spirit: Toward a New Theology of Work* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 99.

²¹ Francis Brown, 781.

²² Boadt describes this passage as *etiological* because it explains the reasons for current conditions. He notes as well that this theme continues throughout the OT; Boadt, 121.

²³ *Ibid.*, 253.

work is to be burdensome and accompanied by disappointments and vexations. In God's creation work was not a curse; it becomes a curse because of sin. The laborer's days would be filled with toil, and toil is irksome. Thus, the harsh and cruel realities of the world are described as direct results of sin.²⁴

Agrell concurs, "Work has at its base a divine commission (before and after the fall) but . . . because of man's disobedience, it is in one way or another cursed, but is nonetheless life-giving."²⁵

After the pronouncing of the curses, we read that the Lord drove Adam from the Garden of Eden "to till the ground" (Gen. 3:23).

As noted, the effects of the fall upon humans and their labor continued after Adam. After Cain killed Abel, the Lord said to him, "Now you are under a curse and driven from the ground...and it will no longer yield its crops for you. You will be a restless wanderer on the earth" (Gen. 4:11-12). Similarly, Noah cursed Canaan to be the "lowest of slaves" and a slave to Shem (Gen. 9:25-26).

Conflicts regarding work in the Bible also reflect mankind's fallen nature. For example, we learn that there were disputes over water and grazing rights between herders (including the herders of Abram and Lot and later between Isaac and the herders of Gerar; Gen. 13:7; 26:21).

W. S. Reid notes that toil is "the theme of the book of Ecclesiastes" as "man as a sinner works solely with worldly ends...the outcome being a sense of hopelessness, for ultimately he will disappear from this earth and his works with him." He explains that, "Only as he interprets his work in light of eternity will his understanding of it change."²⁶

²⁴ Henry Jackson Flanders, Jr., Robert Wilson Crapps, and David Anthony Smith, *People of the Covenant: An Introduction to the Old Testament* (3d ed.; New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 101.

²⁵ Goren Agrell, *Work Toil and Sustenance*, Stephen Westerholm trans. (Forlag, Sweden: Verbum, 1976), 68.

²⁶ W. S. Reid, "Work," *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, Walter Elwell, ed (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984), 1188. It is interesting to note that the term *toil* remains in use today to refer to work, as evidenced by a

This dual nature of blessing and toil has shaped many modern views of work, including the so-called *Prosperity Gospel*. Christian author Keith Intrater, for example, has written that a distinction should be made in contemporary life between *work* and *toil*, explaining that, “Work is the positive experience of a man being actively involved in the function for which he was designed.... Toil is the perverted counterfeit of work; it is purposeless and frustrating and occurs when a man is separated from the designs of God.”²⁷

He continues with the assertion that, “Toil is an indication that one’s work is not flowing in blessed harmony with God.”²⁸ He bases this on the fact that “When a man works under the covenant, he is brought into promotion and leadership. When one is striving under toil, he slips further down into lower states of degrading activity.”²⁹

But on the contrary, the Bible is clear that the effects of Adam’s and Eve’s choices at the Fall have continued as a *present reality for all people*. Just as mankind experiences the noetic effects of sin (such as temptation and doubt), so the presence of sin affects mankind’s labor. In addition, I question the author’s assertion that toil indicates that one is not “flowing in harmony with God” and that under the covenant, Christian work will always reflect “promotion and leadership” instead of “degrading activity.” The Bible does not support this notion, and it will be addressed in detail in later sections.

recent newspaper article that described a man who works in the financial industry. “Today, he *toils* at the low end of the housing loan food chain as a mortgage broker in Great Neck, NY. His annual pay has plunged to about \$95,000 from \$400,000 or so.” (Paul Davidson, “Executives Slip Down the Corporate Ladder – Economy Has Forced Many into Taking Jobs a Few Rungs Lower,” *USA Today*, December 3, 2010: B-1). To some evidently, a \$95,000 a year job is identified as *toil* (although others might see it as a *blessing*).

²⁷ Keith Intrater, *Covenant Relationships: A Handbook for Integrity and Loyalty* (Shippensburg, Pa.: Destiny Image, 1989), 170.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 174.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 175.

Work in Light of the Lord's Deliverance

Interestingly, several passages in the OT do point to the Lord's deliverance of His people from the curse of toil. Glimpses of this are first seen in Genesis when Lamech names his son Noah, explaining prophetically that "Out of the ground which the LORD has cursed this one shall bring us relief from our work and from the toil of our hands" (Gen. 5:29). This prophesy seems to be fulfilled later in Genesis when the Lord promised in the Noachic covenant, "I will never again curse the ground because of man" (Gen. 8:21).³⁰ With the promise of "seedtime and harvest" we learn that Noah "was the first tiller of the soil" and "the first to plant a vineyard" (Gen. 9:20).

The Exodus

Although the word *toil* is not used in Exodus, the book also displays the Lord's deliverance from difficult working conditions. It is interesting to compare the beginning chapters of Exodus with the final chapter, where some very distinct contrasts regarding work can be observed. The beginning chapters describe the Hebrews laboring as slaves in oppressive conditions in Egypt, while the end of the book describes the skilled craftsmen of Israel working to create many items for the worship of Yahweh.

At the beginning of Exodus we are told that the Lord heard and saw the plight of the Hebrew people – He "heard their groaning," "saw their misery," "heard them crying out because of their slave drivers," and was "concerned about their suffering" (Exod. 2:24; 3:7).

³⁰ I use the word "seems" here because scholars such as Donald Gowan argue against this interpretation. Gowan notes that "The meaning of Lamech's saying (in Gen. 5:29) is not clear." He adds, "What kind of relief Noah was expected to offer from 'our work' and 'the toil of our hands' is not indicated (in Gen. 5:29), so for lack of anything better scholars have suggested that it refers to his reputation as planter of the first vineyard." Donald E. Gowan, *From Eden to Babel: A Commentary on the Book of Genesis 1-11* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 81.

The labor conditions were so difficult for the Israelites that they “would not listen to Moses, because of their broken spirit and their cruel slavery.” In the midst of their difficulty, however, the Lord told the Israelites,

I am the LORD, and I will bring you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians, and I will deliver you from their bondage, and I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with great acts of judgment, and I will take you for my people, and I will be your God; and you shall know that I am the LORD your God, who has brought you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians. (Exod. 6:6-7)

As the Exodus narrative continues, we learn that the Lord did powerfully free the Israelites from the hands of Pharaoh and led them to the Promised Land. In their exodus, God commanded the Israelites to tell their children, “By strength of hand the LORD brought us out of Egypt, from the house of bondage.” (Exod. 13:14)

The Exodus account of deliverance from the hands of Pharaoh profoundly shaped the ancient Israelites as well as many moderns. In the United States, for example, the account deeply influenced leaders in the Abolitionist and the Civil Rights movements.³¹ More recently, leaders of the so-called Liberation Theology movement have also found inspiration in the Exodus account. This branch of theology (which also includes Black and Feminist Liberation Theology) has its origins in Latin America, and developed in response to repressive regimes, extreme poverty and social stratification. Denis Carroll explains,

The theologians of liberation read the Exodus in a socio-political framework as well as in a religious context. They see it as a great symbol of God’s liberative intent, subversive of oppression, full of promise for all who aspire to reverse the tide of injustice and suffering.³²

³¹ Cullen Schippe and Chuck Stetson, *The Bible and Its Influence* (Fairfax, Va.: BLP, 2006), 89. For example, Negro spirituals such as “Go Down Moses” incorporated language from Exodus while Martin Luther King, Jr. mentioned the Exodus account several times in his speech, “I See the Promised Land”.

³² Denis Carroll, *What is Liberation Theology* (Dublin: Mercier, 1987), 38.

James H. Cone, a Black Liberation theologian, argues that “The exodus of Israel from Egypt was a revelation-liberation. In this revelatory event, Israel came to know God as the liberator of the oppressed.”³³

Andre Neher, another Liberation Theologian concurs, “With the Exodus a new age has struck for humanity – redemption from misery.”³⁴ Likewise, this liberation, according to Carroll, “is the freeing of people from the intolerable circumstances of poverty and marginalization.”³⁵

In the same vein, Rosemary Radford Ruether, a Feminist Liberation theologian has explained that,

Feminist theology needs to affirm the God of Exodus, of liberation and new being...the God/ess who is the foundation...of our being and our new being embraces both the roots of...our existence (matter) and also the endlessly new creative potential (spirit). The God/ess who is the foundation of our being-new being does not lead us back to a stifled, dependent self.³⁶

In contrast to this view (pointing out first that there is no evidence in the OT of Yahweh being a Goddess), I find it significant that there are many places in Exodus where the Lord provides a reason for releasing the Hebrews from slavery. The reason for the Exodus, however, is not described as economic or material (or the fulfillment of one’s creative potential), but rather as part of God’s redemptive plan to establish a people for His own purposes. The Exodus therefore was a reflection of Israel’s election by God because of the covenant that He had established with His people:

³³ James H Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1986), 47.

³⁴ Carroll, 32.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Rosemary Radford Ruether, “Sexism and God-Talk,” *Readings in Christian Ethics: A Historical Sourcebook*, ed. J. Philip Wogaman and Douglas M. Strong, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1996), 368.

Table 2.7. The Exodus as a reflection of Israel’s election

Description	Passage
“God heard their groaning and he remembered his <i>covenant</i> with Abraham...and was concerned about them.”	Exod. 2:24-25, emphasis added
“But Moses said to God, ‘Who am I, that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?’ And God said, ‘I will be with you. And this will be a sign to you that it is I who have sent you: When you have brought the people out of Egypt, you will <i>worship</i> God on this mountain.”	Exod. 3:11-12, emphasis added
“Then say to Pharaoh, ‘This is what the LORD says: Israel is my firstborn son, and I told you, ‘Let my people go, so he may <i>worship</i> me.”	Exod. 4:22-23, <i>C.f.</i> , 5:1; 7:16; 8:1, 20; 9:1, 13; 10:3, emphasis added

Thus, instead of providing an economic or material reason, we read that it was about *worship*. Even Pharaoh’s officials recognized this, asking, “How long will this man be a snare to us? Let the people go, so that they may *worship* the Lord their God” (Exod. 10:7).

We learn that when the Israelites, “heard that the LORD was concerned about them and had seen their misery, they bowed down and worshipped” (Exod. 4:31).

As John Bright explains,

[We] can find no period in Israel’s history when she did not believe that she was the chosen people of Yahweh, and that her calling had been signaled by his gracious acts toward her in the exodus deliverance. For later periods the statement is so obvious as to require no reinforcement. One has only to recall...the virtual unanimity of later Biblical literature, continually hark back to the exodus as the unforgettable example of the power and grace of Yahweh calling a people to himself.³⁷

³⁷ John Bright, *A History of Israel 4th ed.* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2000), 148.

Thus, although we can observe the changing labor conditions of the Israelites (when comparing the beginning of Exodus to the end of the book) and we learn in many other places in Scripture that injustice and subjugation are against God’s moral Law, it would be a mistake to assume that the changing of economic conditions is the main point of the Exodus account. As T.E. Fretheim explains, “the liberation of Israelite slaves is a central event in Exodus, but it is not the final objective of God’s work; redemption is in the service of a new creation. To this end the Exodus narrative moves beyond liberation to new vistas of life and well-being, embodied especially in the gift of the law...(and) worship at the tabernacle for a sinful people.”³⁸

As evangelical pastor Thabiti Anyabwile has noted in his analysis of Liberation Theology in comparison to an evangelical understanding of the Christian Gospel, “It’s easy to see how the thing most needed — the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ — is neglected.... I fear that by assuming that gaining the world in an economic or political sense is the same as keeping your soul.”³⁹

Work as Service to God

As noted previously, Genesis 2:15 states explicitly regarding work that “The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to *till it and keep it*” (emphasis added). As noted earlier, the Hebrew word frequently translated into English as *till* in Genesis 2:15 is

³⁸ T. E. Fretheim, “Book of Exodus,” *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Pentateuch*, 254.

³⁹ Collin Hansen, “Black Power From the Pulpit,” *Christianity Today* 52 (March 20, 2008), [online]; available from: <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2008/marchweb-only/112-44.0.html>; Internet; accessed 2/28/11.

'abhad—a common word used for work or labor in the OT.⁴⁰ Interestingly, however, as J.W. Walton notes, this word can also be translated as *sacred service*.⁴¹ He explains,

The verbs *'abad* and *samar* (NRSV “till” and “keep”) are terms most frequently encountered in discussions of human service to God rather than descriptions of agricultural tasks. The verb *'abad* certainly can refer to farming activity (e.g. Gen. 2:5, 3:23), but in those contexts the nuance of the verb is conditioned by its direct object (the ground). When the verb does not take a direct object, it often refers to the work connected with one’s vocation (e.g. Ex. 20:9). The broader sense of the word is often connected to religious service deemed as worship (e.g. Ex. 3:12) or of priestly functionaries serving in the sanctuary precinct (e.g. Num. 3:7-10). In these cases, the object of the verb usually refers to what or whom is being worshiped. (e.g. Ex. 4:23, 23:33)⁴²

In his analysis of the passage from Genesis 2, Walton concludes that, “it is likely that the tasks given to Adam are of a priestly nature: caring for sacred space.”⁴³

Thus, work in the OT is described in many places as *sacred service*. Many passages point to this important concept. In Numbers, for example, *'abhad* occurs twenty-one times in reference to Levitical service:

“They are to perform duties for him and for the whole community at the tent of meeting by doing *the work* of the tabernacle.” (Num. 3:7, emphasis added)

In the Exodus narrative, *'abhad* occurs twenty-nine times, with many of those instances being synonymous with “worship.” For example we can read of Yahweh saying, “Let my son go, so he may *worship* me” (Exod. 4:23, emphasis added).

This use of *'abhad* continues throughout the OT (being variously translated as “bowing down,” “serving,” and “worship”), for example in Deut. 6:13, “Fear the LORD your God, serve him only and take your oaths in his name” (*C.f.*, Deut. 10:20; Josh. 24:14).

⁴⁰ Francis Brown, 712-713.

⁴¹ J. W. Walton, “The Garden of Eden,” *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Pentateuch*, 205.

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ *Ibid.*

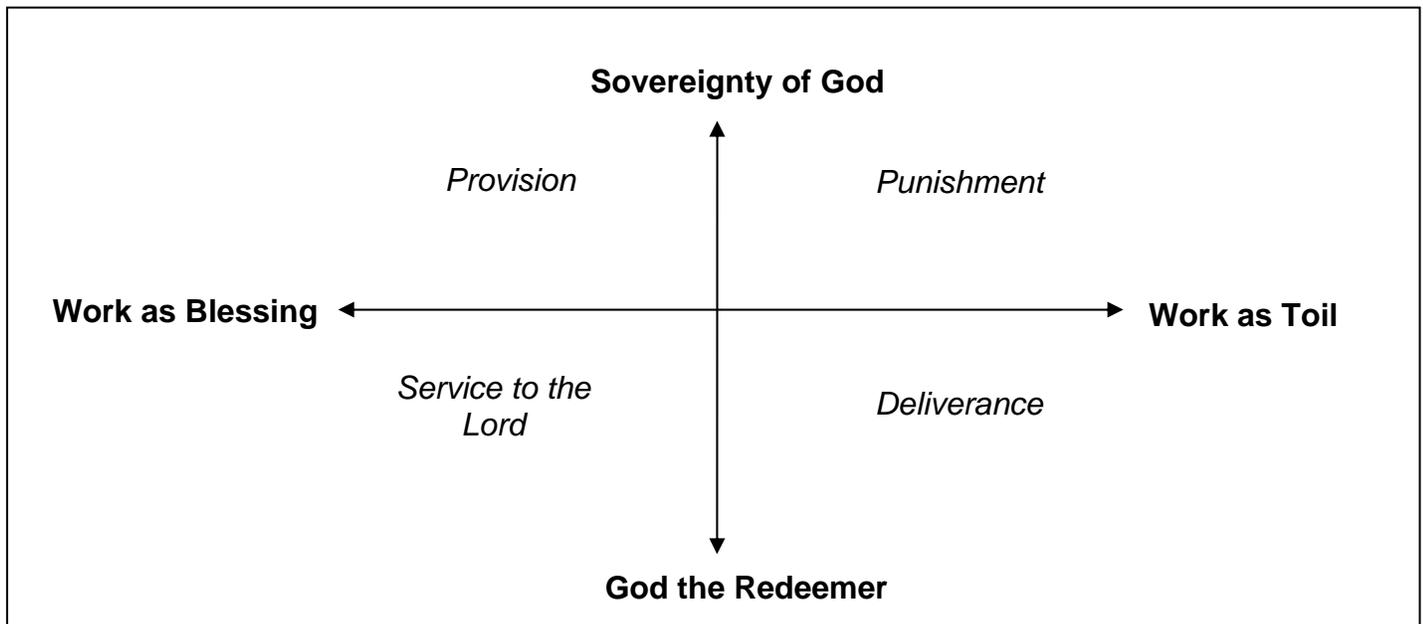
As service to God, it comes as no surprise that the Law Moses received contained a number of the laws that referred to work and the Sabbath (i.e. Exod. 34:21). Otto Piper explains, “The Sabbath commandment, which was incomprehensible to the ancient world, served Israel as a reminder that man must not expect everything from the work of his hands.”⁴⁴ The subject of Sabbath rest will be covered in more detail later in this thesis.

General Conclusions - Work in the Old Testament

As evidenced by the previous pages, the OT contains multiple passages regarding work and labor. There are some passages that refer to work as a *gift* and *blessing* to mankind, displaying God’s sovereign *provision* for humanity, while other passages refer to work as *toil*, as God’s sovereign *punishment* and a consequence of the Fall. Other passages refer in vague terms to God’s *deliverance* from toil, while still other passages refer to work as *service to God* (work that is unto God and to help other people).

Figure 1 provides a visual illustration of this theology of work as described in the OT.

Figure 1 – A Theology of Work in the Old Testament



⁴⁴ Otto A. Piper, “The Meaning of Work” *Theology Today* 14 (July 1957): 175.

CHAPTER 3: EXTRA-BIBLICAL BACKGROUND

Greco-Roman Views

Not only does the OT provide an important background and context to the Gospels, the views of the ancient Greeks and Romans are also crucial, since the region where Christ lived and ministered, and where the Gospels were written, was conquered by the Greeks and then by the Romans prior to the birth of Christ.¹ Although there were many variations between the two cultures (language, geography, and a time span of several centuries), there were also many similarities. Because of these similarities (and for the sake of brevity), I have combined the views of the ancient Greeks and Romans in the following section.

Agrarian Economies of Ancient Greece and Rome

Although there are many examples of commerce and trade in the economies of ancient Greece and Rome, both economies were largely *agrarian*. Evidence of agrarian labor and vocation in ancient Greece and Rome can be observed throughout Greco-Roman literature and philosophical works. The Greek historian Herodotus, for example, referred frequently to the role of agrarian work in his *History*, which was published in approximately 420 B.C.²

¹ For more on the importance of Greco-Roman culture and institutions in the NT social environment, see John E. Stambaugh and David L. Balch, *The New Testament in Its Social Environment* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1986), 13ff.

² M.I. Finley ed. *The Greek Historians* (New York: Viking, 1959), 62-63, 164.

Trade in Ancient Greece and Rome

Although largely agrarian, there are however many examples of commerce in the historical accounts of ancient Greece and Rome. Herodotus, for example, identified workers (other than agricultural laborers) in his history, including smiths, mariners, and miners.¹ Also in ancient Greece, Solon (c. 354—430 B.C.), “made laws to encourage skilled industry, and compelled every man to teach his son a trade.”²

From Roman inscriptions, we learn that people in similar trades clustered together in various parts of the city of Rome and formed associations, enrolling “anywhere from a dozen to one or two thousand” merchants.³

Laborers and the Poor

The poor (who were non-land owners in Ancient Greece and Rome) far outnumbered the wealthy. Although some worked as merchants or mariners, the large majority worked as laborers on the land.

In ancient Greece, the majority of workers were farm hands (*thes*). Life for these laborers was difficult. Michael Grant notes that for these agrarian laborers, there was always the possibility of famine or ruin.⁴

As with the Greeks, the Roman poor typically had very difficult working conditions. Life expectancy was less than thirty years because of the “back-breaking poverty” that they suffered.⁵ In addition to severe working conditions, the poor also had to contend with debts

¹ Finley, 60, 71, and 115.

² George Botsford, *A History of Greece* (New York: Macmillan, 1901), 52.

³ Ramsay MacMullen, *Roman Social Relations, 50 B.C. to AD 254* (New Haven: Yale University, 1974), 73.

⁴ Michael Grant, *A Social History of Greece and Rome* (New York: Macmillan, 1992), 63.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 76.

and debt collection. We learn in Ancient Rome that the burden of debt was severe as, “the creditor had a legal right to seize the delinquent debtor and his children, to hold them as slaves till they had worked off the debt.”⁶

Slavery in Ancient Greece and Rome

Slaves were an essential part of the ancient economies of Greece and Rome. From the evidence that has survived from ancient Greece, it is estimated that “in classical Athens of the fifth and fourth centuries there were between 80,000 and 100,000 slaves of both sexes, representing about one-third of the total population.”⁷

In ancient Rome, some have estimated that possibly a quarter of the population in Italy were slaves.⁸ Treatment of slaves varied greatly throughout the Roman Empire,

They could be looked after decently...or they might be tortured, and thrown to wild beasts, and sexually abused, and have their families broken up by sale.⁹

Wealthy Greeks and Romans

In both of these economies, the Greeks and the Romans had two distinct economic classes: the rich and the poor. The dividing line between these two classes was property ownership, a dividing line that correlated to those who had to work and those who did not.

In Greece, the wealthy engaged in agriculturally based economic activity and typically enjoyed a life of leisure.¹⁰ Herodotus told of an invasion of Athens that occurred

⁶ Botsford, 72.

⁷ Grant, 93.

⁸ MacMullen, 92.

⁹ Grant, 100.

¹⁰ Ibid., 44.

just after the mid-day meal when the Athenians had “betaken themselves, some to dice, others to sleep.”¹¹

Similarly in Rome, the wealthy owned large holdings of property and “exploited the labour” that worked in the fields.¹²

There were also excesses in both Greece and Rome. According to Plutarch, many wealthy Romans enjoyed flaunting their wealth, because “most people think that to be deprived of the chance to display their wealth is to be deprived of wealth itself.”¹³

The Attitudes of the Wealthy Class Toward Work

Many modern scholars believe that wealthy Greeks and Romans held work in contempt.¹⁴ In ancient Greece, for example, the character Odysseus in Homer’s *The Odyssey* was offended at being called a merchant.¹⁵

Similarly, in Rome labor was seen as something beneath a wealthy Roman, something “not quite reputable”¹⁶ and a law in 232 was even enacted which barred the wealthy from engaging in trade.¹⁷

Much loathing was directed at laborers. Ammianus Marcellinus explained that “most of the [poor] are addicted to gluttony.”¹⁸ Epitaphs and graffiti also point to the Roman contempt for labor and the poor. One Roman epitaph reads, “whoever hopes to grow rich by

¹¹ Finley, 56.

¹² Grant, 50.

¹³ Ibid., 62.

¹⁴ Cf., Jurgen Moltmann, *On Human Dignity* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984), 37-39. Stambaugh and Balch also explain that “the aristocracies of the Greco-Roman cities despised manual labor.” Stambaugh and Balch, 116.

¹⁵ Grant, 42.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid., 81.

trade will be fooled by his hopes.”¹⁹

The Role of Religion in Greco-Roman Attitudes toward Work

Religion played an important role in ancient attitudes toward work. In ancient Greece and Rome, it was common to find on inscriptions the phrase “like his ancestors” to describe a person and their work, identifying the fact that many times skills were passed down from generation to generation.²⁰ The initial passing of a skill to one’s first ancestor, it was believed, came from a god or a mythological character. According to Guthrie, “The justification for the mythical genealogy is that it was regular Greek practice for a craft to be handed on from father to son.”²¹

In addition to a genealogical source, specific Olympian Greek and Roman gods were seen as “patrons” of different types of work. For example, it was believed that “Demeter brought corn” while “Dionysos brought wine.”²² Zeus, the Greeks believed, “sent the rain” while “Hephaestus (was) the blacksmith and craftsman; Hermes the merchant and messenger.”²³ The same was true in Roman religion as well, Mercurius, for example, “was a patron god of shopkeepers.”²⁴ As worshippers, the ancient Greek and Roman workers would attempt to receive blessings from their “patron” god or goddess by performing specific acts.

¹⁹ Grant, 55.

²⁰ MacMullen, 101.

²¹ W.K.C. Guthrie, *The Greek Philosophers* (New York: Harper and Row, 1950), 59.

²² Walter Burkert, *Greek Religion: Archaic and Classical*, John Raffan, trans. (Cambridge, Ma.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1985), 314.

²³ Stambaugh and Balch, 127.

²⁴ Joseph Jay Deiss, *Herculaneum* (Malibu, Ca.: The J. Paul Getty Museum, 1989), 123.

For example, Plutarch describes three *holy ploughings*.²⁵ In another example, we learn that potters “invoked the name of Vulcan as they were removing pots from their kiln.”²⁶

Also during the Hellenistic age, a robust belief in *luck* or *chance* developed. According to Rose, “the goddess Tyche (Fortune or Chance), who in the classical period is mostly a literary personification, took artistic shape and found worshippers everywhere in the Greek world.”²⁷

By the age of Alexander the Great, the belief was widespread and the cult of Fortune or Chance was immensely popular.²⁸ In fact, it appears that there were times when the traditional mythology was discarded and Luck or Chance was the dominant belief that the ancients held. According to John Murphy,

Gilbert Murray, in *Five Stages of Greek Religion*, points to certain times in Greek and Roman History when masses of the population suddenly appear to believe in nothing but ‘luck’. They think of it in personal form, so that (tyche), that which happens whether good or ill, Fortuna, Chance or Fortune, Sors “the luck of the game”, is exalted into a goddess, and worship given and sacrifices offered to her.²⁹

Jacob Burckhardt notes that the Tycheum (the temple where Tyche [Chance] was worshipped) was typically one of the most elegant temples in a city.³⁰ Similarly, in Rome the worship of Fortuna (Chance) was also very popular.³¹

This placing of one’s faith (i.e. worship) in Luck and Chance has continued into the modern era. With proponents in many sectors of society (from popular figures to behavioral scientists and evolutionary biologists), this popular worldview (or *secular religion*, as Wayne

²⁵ H. J. Rose, *Ancient Greek Religion* (London: Hesperides, 2008), 76.

²⁶ Stambaugh and Balch, 130.

²⁷ Rose, 114.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ John Murphy, *The Origins and History of Religion* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1949), 356.

³⁰ Jacob Burckhardt, *History of Greek Culture* (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 1898), 15.

³¹ Wayne E. Oates, *Luck: A Secular Faith* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1995), xii.

Oates calls it) has become an influential system of belief in contemporary culture. As Oates explains, “We rest on our luck. We put our faith in luck as we run the gauntlet of chance.”³²

Compared to the Old and New Testaments, this ancient (and modern) faith in Chance and Luck is not supported by biblical revelation. We learn in Scripture that God brings all things to pass for His purposes and His glory and for the good of His people:

Table 3.1. Descriptions of God bringing all things to pass for His glory

Description	Passage
The Psalmist explains, “But the plans of the LORD stand firm forever, the purposes of his heart through all generations.”	Ps. 33:11
The author of Proverbs explains, “The LORD works out everything to its proper end— even the wicked for a day of disaster.”	Prov. 16:4
Paul writes in Romans, “And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.”	Rom. 8:28
Paul continues, “Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out! Who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counselor?” Who has ever given to God, that God should repay them?” <i>For from him and through him and for him are all things. To him be the glory forever! Amen.</i> ”	Rom. 11:33-36, emphasis added) ³³

Lorraine Boettner argues that this view is far superior to placing one’s faith in Chance or Luck:

Who would not prefer to have his affairs in the hands of a God of infinite power,

³² Oates, 49.

³³ For God’s control and decree over life, see also Eph 1:3-11.

wisdom, holiness, and love, rather than to have them left to fate, or chance, or irrevocable natural law, or to shortsighted and perverted self? Those who reject God's sovereignty should consider what alternatives they have left.³⁴

Similarly, B.B. Warfield writes, "It is a great thing to be delivered from the inordinate realm of aimless chance. The goddess Tyche, Fortuna, was one of the most terrible divinities of the old world, quite as terrible as and scarcely distinguishable from Fate. It is a great thing to be under the control of intelligent purpose."³⁵

This biblical view provides a helpful reassurance that life (and work) is not a series of chance occurrences but one that is under the sovereign control and authority of a powerful and living God.

Extra-Biblical Milieu – Rabbinic/Intertestamental

Just as the OT and Greco-Roman perspectives provide a helpful understanding to the context of the Gospels, so also can Rabbinic literature and teaching. This area has some difficulties, however, because of the problem of dating the materials. Some materials were written during the time of Christ, yet others were written a generation or two afterwards.³⁶

Thus, because of this issue, I have used to the word "milieu" instead of "background" in this section's heading and have limited this section to only a few points.

Rabbinic Attitudes toward Work

It is interesting to note that unlike the wealthy Greeks and Romans, work does not seem to be held in contempt by Jewish religious leaders. In fact, several scholars point to evidence that even Priests and Pharisees engaged in trade. Joachim Jeremias explains,

³⁴ Loraine Boettner, *The Reformed Doctrine of Predestination* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1936), 32.

³⁵ Benjamin B. Warfield, *The Plan of Salvation* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication, 1915), 14.

³⁶ For issues surrounding the problems of dating rabbinic materials see Wayne Meeks, *The First Urban Christians* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983), 33.

Trade in Jerusalem before AD 70 had reached a stage of development corresponding to town economy. The profession of a merchant was held in great respect. Even priests engaged in commerce.³⁷

P. W. Barnett has pointed out that rabbis were expected to support themselves with labor.³⁸ Some have even pointed to the Rabbinic maxim: “Whoever does not teach his son a craft teaches him to be a robber.”³⁹

Ronald Hock has noted, however, that there is a problem with labeling this as the common Rabbinic view of work, explaining that “the idea of combining Torah and trade is difficult to establish much earlier than the middle of the second century A.D.”⁴⁰ Even Jeremias admits,

More than a hundred of the rabbis named in the Talmud were artisans and were called after their trades. Of course, these belonged in the main to a later time.⁴¹

Thus, from the evidence it appears that work was not held in contempt by Priests and Pharisees, yet there is some uncertainty if religious leaders were actually engaged in trade at the time of Christ.

Work in the Time of Jesus

From Rabbinic sources we learn that Jerusalem around the time of Christ was filled with economic activity.⁴² From the Rabbinic literature, Jeremias lists a number of professions

³⁷ Joachim Jeremias, *Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1962), 31.

³⁸ P.W. Barnett, “Tentmaking,” *Dictionary of Paul and his Letters*, Gerald F. Hawthorne and Ralph P. Martin eds., (Downers Grove, Il.: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 927.

³⁹ Ronald F. Hock, *The Social Context of Paul’s Ministry: Tentmaking and Apostleship* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980), 22. Jeremias translates this maxim: “He who does not teach his son a craft teach him brigandage.” Jeremias, 3.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Jeremias, 112.

⁴² Ibid., 53.

in Jerusalem, including, “nail maker, flax trader, baker, miller of pearl barley, currier, scrivener, sandal maker, master builder, asphalt merchant and tailor.”⁴³

Sources also evidence the importance of produce. Olive groves on the Mount of Olives were “outstandingly luxuriant in comparison with the surrounding land” and of great economic importance to the city of Jerusalem.⁴⁴ In addition to olive trees, corn, grapes, figs and chickpeas were also cultivated.⁴⁵

We also learn that during the reign of Herod the Great, builders were utilized for many of his projects. Thus, stone cutters, skilled craftsmen, mosaic makers, and even road sweepers are listed in the literature.⁴⁶

One reason Jerusalem had so much trade was because it was the center of both political and religious authority during the time of Christ. Because of the Temple, many pilgrims visited the holy city, some depositing private fortunes in the Temple treasury while others came to Jerusalem upon retirement to grow old and die.⁴⁷ Thus, with these many pilgrims, there were many commercial transactions that occurred in Jerusalem, from the buying and selling of animals (that were in demand for both human consumption and for temple sacrifices) to the purchasing of luxury goods and building materials.

In the midst of this commerce, however, according to the Rabbinic literature, it appears that there were some types of trade that were *despised* or held in contempt. We learn that Abba Saul (in approximately AD 150) “quotes the trades which a father should not teach

⁴³ Jeremias, 3.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 7.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 41, 44, 45.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 14-16.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 56.

his son.”⁴⁸ These despised trades included: ass-driver, camel-driver, sailor, carter (i.e. a peasant who brought produce into the city), herdsman, shopkeeper, physician, butcher, dung-collector, tanner, cooper-smelter, goldsmith, peddler, weaver, barber, launderer, blood-letter, bath attendant, gambler with dice, userer, pigeon trainer, tax collector, and publican.⁴⁹

These trades were despised for different reasons. Some were “particularly notorious for leading to dishonesty.”⁵⁰ Other professions were despised because the worker potentially would touch and sell animals that were blemished or “were suspected of transgressing certain demands of the religious law.”⁵¹ Still other professions were despised because they “had to do with women.”⁵² Some vocations, such as shepherds, were even despised in direct contrast to OT teaching.

⁴⁸ Jeremias, 303.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid., 307.

⁵² Ibid., 3.

CHAPTER 4: THE GOSPELS AND WORK

With the backgrounds of the Old Testament and the ancient Greco-Roman and Rabbinic worlds in view, let us now turn our attention to the primary question of this thesis:

“What can be learned about work from the Gospels?”

The Gospels, like the books in the OT, contain many references to work. The Gospel according to Matthew, for example, refers to the following vocations and work activities:

Table 4.1. Vocation/Work Activity in Matthew

Vocation/Work Activity in Matthew	Passage
chief priests	Matt. 2:4, 20:18*, 21:15, 26:3, 26:57) ¹
scribes, teachers of the law	Matt. 2:4, 12:38, 13:52*, 15:1, 20:18*, 21:15, 23:2*, 23:13-29*, 26:57
fishermen	Matt. 4:21, 13:48
judges and court officers	Matt. 5:25*
tax collectors	Matt. 5:46*, 9:9, 10:3, 18:17*, 21:31*
picking grapes and figs	Matt. 7:16*
builders of houses	Matt. 7:24*
centurions and soldiers	Matt. 8:8-9, 27:27, 28:15
tending swine	Matt. 8:33
sewing	Matt. 9:16*
synagogue leader	Matt. 9:18
shepherds	Matt. 9:36, 18:12*, 26:31*

¹ Passages in which Jesus referred to vocational activities in His teaching are marked with an asterisk.

Vocation/Work	Passage
Activity in Matthew	
workers	Matt. 9:37*
students and teachers	Matt. 10:24-25*
servants and masters	Matt. 10:24-25*, 18:23-33*, 24:45-51*, 25:14-28*
children in the marketplace	Matt. 11:16*
grainfields	Matt. 12:1
farmer/sower	Matt. 13:3*
mixing flour	Matt. 13:33*
merchant	Matt. 13:45*
carpenter	Matt. 13:55
attendants to Herod	Matt. 14:2
collectors of the Temple tax	Matt. 17:24
owner, workers, foreman and farmers/tenants of a vineyard	Matt. 20:1*, 20:8*, 21:28*, 21:33-43*
money changers and sellers of animals in the Temple courts	Matt. 21:12
prostitutes	Matt. 21:31*
servants to a king	Matt. 22:3*
workers in the field	Matt. 24:18*, 24:40*
women grinding with a hand mill	Matt. 24:41*
buying oil for lamps	Matt. 25:10*
the potter's field	Matt. 27:7

The Gospel according to Mark refers to these vocations and work activities:

Table 4.2. Vocation/Work Activity in Mark

Vocation/Work Activity in Mark	Passage
fishermen	Mark 1:16, 1:19
scribes/teachers of the Law	Mark 1:22, 2:6, 2:16, 3:22, 7:1, 8:31, 11:18, 11:27, 12:12, 12:28, 12:38*, 14:1, 14:43, 15:1
priest/high priest/chief priests	Mark 1:44, Mark 2:26*, 8:31, 10:33*, 11:18, 11:27, 12:12, 14:1, 14:43, 14:47-66, 15:1, 15:3, 15:10, 15:11, 15:31
tax collectors	Mark 2:14-16
doctor	Mark 2:17*, 5:26
sewing	Mark 2:21*
grainfields	Mark 2:23
farmer/sower	Mark 4:3-20*, 4:26-29*
tending pigs	Mark 5:14
synagogue leader	Mark 5:22
carpenter	Mark 6:3
executioner	Mark 6:27
shepherd	Mark 6:34, 14:27*
money changers and sellers of doves in the Temple Courts	Mark 11:15

Vocation/Work Activity in Mark	Passage
owner, farmers/tenants of a vineyard	Mark 12:1-9*
builders	Mark 12:10*
workers in the field	Mark 13:16*
selling perfume	Mark 14:5
servant of the high priest	Mark 14:66
soldiers/centurion	Mark 15:16, 15:39, 15:45
buying linen cloth	Mark 15:46
buying spices	Mark 16:1

Luke's Gospel refers to these vocations and work activities:

Table 4.3. Vocation/Work Activity in Luke

Vocation/Work Activity in Luke	Passage
priest	Luke 1:8, 5:14, 10:31*, 17:15
shepherds	Luke 2:8
high-priests/chief-priests	Luke 3:2 , 19:47, 20:1, 20:19, 22:1, 22:4, 23:10, 24:20
cutting down trees	Luke 3:9
gathering wheat	Luke 3:17*
physician	Luke 4:23, 5:31*
fishermen	Luke 5:2
teachers of the law	Luke 5:17, 5:21, 9:21*, 10:25, 11:52*, 11:53, 19:47, 20:1, 20:19, 22:1, 23:10

Vocation/Work Activity in Luke	Passage
tax collector	Luke 5:27, 7:29, 7:34, 15:1, 19:1
mending old garments	Luke 5:36*
grainfields	Luke 6:1
picking figs and grapes	Luke 6:44*
building a house	Luke 6:49*
centurion and his servant	Luke 7:1
children sitting in the marketplace	Luke 7:32*
moneylender	Luke 7:41*
farmer/sower	Luke 8:5ff*
tending pigs	Luke 8:34, Luke 15:15*
synagogue leader	Luke 8:40, 13:14
building shelters	Luke 9:33
building tombs	Luke 11:48*
rich farmer harvesting crops, storing grain in barns	Luke 12:16-18*
growing a fig tree in a vineyard and looking for fruit	Luke 13:6-9*
planting a mustard seed	Luke 13:19*
mixing yeast in flour	Luke 13:21*
owning an ox	Luke 14:5*
building a tower	Luke 14:28*
shepherd with a hundred sheep	Luke 15:4-7*
working in a field	Luke 15:25

Vocation/Work Activity in Luke	Passage
raising calves	Luke 15:27*
manager who manages his master's debts of olive oil and bushels of wheat	Luke 16:1-9
buying and selling, planting and building	Luke 17:28*
grinding grain	Luke 17:35*
judge	Luke 18:2*
begging	Luke 18:35
servants of a king	Luke 19:13*
owner/farmers/tenants of a vineyard	Luke 20:9*
builders	Luke 20:17*
sifting wheat	Luke 22:31*
servant of the high priest	Luke 22:50
servant girl	Luke 22:56

The Gospel according to John refers to these vocations and work activities:

Table 4.4. Vocation/Work Activity in John

Vocation/Work Activity in John	Passage
priest	John 1:9, 1:19
selling cattle, sheep, doves and	John 2:14

Vocation/Work Activity in John	Passage
exchanging money in the Temple courts	
building the Temple	John 2:20
ruling council	John 3:1
drawing water	John 4:7
buying food	John 4:8
harvest	John 4:35
servants of a royal official	John 4:51
buying bread	John 6:5
working for food	John 6:27
chief priests/high priests	John 7:32, 7:45, 11:47, 11:49, 11:57, 12:10, 18:13, 18:15, 18:19, 18:35, 19:6, 19:21
temple guards	John 7:45
teachers of the law	John 8:3
slave	John 8:34,35*
gate of the sheep pen	John 10:1*, 10:9*
shepherd	John 10:2*, 10:11*
gatekeeper	John 10:3*
hired hand	John 10:12*
selling perfume	John 12:5
wheat producing many seeds	John 12:24*
servants and masters	John 13:16*, 15:15*, 15:20*
buying food	John 13:29
vine and gardener	John 15:1*

Vocation/Work Activity in John	Passage
servant of the high priest	John 18:10, 18:26
servant girl	John 18:16
soldiers	John 19:2, 19:16, 19:23, 19:24, 19:32, 19:34
fishing/fishermen	John 21:1

General Categories of Work in the Gospels

Upon review of the Gospels, I have identified three different categories of work that will be examined in the sections that follow:

- individuals who were *described by their vocation*
- descriptions of the *work of Christ* (both before and during his public ministry)
- vocation and labor within Jesus' *teaching* and *parables* (which were indicated on the previous pages with an asterisk)

Individuals in the Gospels

The Gospels contain a number of references to individuals who are identified by their vocation. In some instances, an individual's name is provided with their vocation, such as:

Table 4.5. Named individuals in the Gospels identified by their vocation

Name	Vocational Description
Simon and Andrew	the fishermen (Matt. 4:18)
Matthew and Zacchaeus	the tax collectors (Matt. 9:9; 10:3; Luke 19:1)
Jesus	the carpenter (Mark 6:3)
Malchus	the servant (John 18:10)

Name	Vocational Description
Caiaphas	the high priest (John 18:3)

This practice of identifying people by their vocation was not limited to the Gospels; it can be observed both in the OT as well as in the other books of the New Testament.²

The majority of individuals that are identified in the Gospels, however, are identified only by their vocation and not by their name. For example:

Table 4.6. Unnamed individuals in the Bible identified by their vocation

Vocation/Work Activity	Passage
angels appear to shepherds	Luke 2:9
Jesus and the disciples encounter people “tending pigs”	Luke 8:34
Jesus and his disciples ate with tax collectors	Matt. 9:10
Peter disowns Jesus after being confronted by a servant girl	Luke 22:56

These encounters in the Gospels reflect what has been discussed previously regarding the nature of the economy of the ancient world, indicating a primarily *agrarian economy* in the Palestine of Jesus’ day (i.e. shepherds, grainfields, vineyards) with some commerce (i.e. selling doves, etc.) performed by people who were predominately poor.³ As Stambaugh and Balch explain, the large majority of workers in the ancient economy of the NT were involved in gathering food by farming or herding, noting that “the Synoptic Gospels devote much

² Examples of vocational descriptions in the NT outside of the Gospels include: “Cornelius, a centurion” (Acts 10:1), “Lydia, a dealer in purple cloth” (Acts 16:14), “a silversmith named Demetrius” (Acts 19:24).

³ Stambaugh and Balch note that “Every rich man whose source of income is identified (in the Gospels) owes his wealth (with two exceptions) to agriculture.” John E. Stambaugh and David L. Balch, *The New Testament in Its Social Environment* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1986), 65.

attention to the processes of planting seed, harvesting fruit, grinding grain, eating bread. Sometimes there is a surplus to gather into barns. Sometimes it is a matter of bare subsistence: When the disciples do not catch any fish, they expect to go hungry (Luke 5:1-11; John 21:3-5).”⁴

The Work of Christ

Another important area of work in the Gospels is the *work of Christ*. I will address this issue in two parts:

1. the work of Christ *prior* to His public ministry
2. and the work of Christ *in* His public ministry

The Work of Christ Prior to the Public Ministry

Many questions have been raised by Christians as well as non-Christians regarding Jesus’ work prior to His public ministry. They have asked:

- What specific work did Jesus do?
- Where did Jesus work?
- What are the implications of Jesus being a worker?

The Gospels, as we will see, provide only limited answers to these questions.

Although there is little evidence in the Gospels regarding Jesus’ life prior to public ministry, it is helpful to examine four passages from each of the Gospels that contain descriptions of onlookers being astonished by Jesus’ powerful and authoritative teaching:

⁴Stambaugh and Balch, 68.

- Mark explains that the people asked: “Isn’t this the carpenter?” (Mark 6:3)⁵
- Similarly, Matthew describes the people asking: “Isn’t this the carpenter’s son?” (Matt. 13:55)
- Luke depicts the people saying: “Isn’t this Joseph’s son?” (Luke 4:22; *C.f.*, John 6:42)
- John records the crowd’s amazement: “How did this man get such learning without having been taught?” (John 7:15)

What specific work did Jesus do?

The passage above from Mark’s Gospel is the only occurrence in the Gospels where Jesus’ occupation is specifically mentioned: *carpenter* (as it is frequently translated into English). The parallel passage in Matthew identifies Jesus as the *carpenter’s son* (which, assuming the common tradition of a father passing skills to his son would also indicate that Jesus was a carpenter).

The Greek word translated “carpenter” in both Mark and Matthew is τέκτων (*tekton*), a word that is a *dis legomenon* in the NT (appearing only in these two passages).⁶ The BDAG NT lexicon describes *tekton* as “one who constructs, builder, carpenter.”⁷ Louw and Nida describe *tekton* as “one who uses various materials (wood, stone, and metal) in

⁵ Outside of the scope of this paper, but of interest, is what follows in this verse—“the son of Mary.” As Dunn notes, “to call someone the son of his mother would most probably strike many as implying some hint of illegitimacy (father unknown) . . . the Markan tradition may be evidence of some popular rumor regarding an irregularity of Jesus’ birth.” James D.G. Dunn, *Jesus Remembered* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 346. Another less scandalous interpretation that Dunn does not explore is that Joseph had died prior to this event.

⁶ The LXX however does use τέκτων several times. *C.f.*, 1 Sam. 13:19, 2 Sam. 5:11, 1 Kings 7:14, 2 Kings 12:11, Isa. 40:20.

⁷ Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed. Rev. and ed. by Frederick W. Danker (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 995.

building—‘builder, carpenter.’”⁸ While Zodhiates describes *tekton* as “an artificer, especially a worker in wood, a carpenter, joiner.”⁹

Much debate, however, has developed regarding the type of work that Jesus actually did.

Many throughout Church History have accepted that Jesus worked as a carpenter.¹⁰ The second-century apologist Justin Martyr proposed that Jesus “was in the habit of working as a carpenter when he was among men.”¹¹ The nineteenth-century church historian Philip Schaff asserted, “Jesus himself was not only the son of a carpenter, but during his youth he worked at that trade himself.”¹² More recently, Mark Allen Powell explained that, “like his father, Jesus worked as a carpenter.”¹³

Others, however, have seen Jesus as a worker who was something *more than a carpenter*.¹⁴ Packer explains that, “In secular Greek *tekton* means a craftsman or builder in wood, stone or metal,”¹⁵ and he notes that although

carpenter is the common rendering here, *tekton* could equally mean “mason” or “smith” (as indeed some of the Fathers took it); or it could mean that Joseph and

⁸ Johannes P. Louw and Eugene Albert Nida, vol. 2, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament : Based on Semantic Domains* (electronic ed. of the 2nd edition.; New York: United Bible Societies, 1996): 519.

⁹ Spiros Zodhiates, *The Complete Word Study Dictionary: New Testament* (Chattanooga, TN: AMG,1992), 1372.

¹⁰ R.A. Batey notes, however, that the translation of *tekton* into the ambiguous Latin term *faber* led some Latin Fathers to assume that Joseph and Jesus were blacksmiths. (R.A. Batey, *Is this not the carpenter? NTS* 30 (1984): 257.

¹¹ Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho*, Ch 88 in *The Writings of Justin Martyr*, The Ante-Nicene Christian Library (London: T&T Clark, 1885), 212. *Cf.*, William Barclay, *Discovering Jesus* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1965; repr. 2000), 87.

¹² Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church* (New York: Scribner, 1887), 150.

¹³ Mark Allen Powell, *Jesus as a Figure in History: How Modern Historians View the Man from Galilee* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1998), 136.

¹⁴ Apologies to Josh McDowell, whose book is entitled *More Than a Carpenter*.

¹⁵ J. I. Packer, “Tekton,” *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*: 279. Interestingly, Packer notes that Paul uses the term *architekton* in I Cor. 3:10, which means “a head builder, masterbuilder, contractor, or director of works” in reference to Paul as a skilled master builder with Christ as the foundation.

Jesus were builders, so that both carpentry and masonry would have been among their skills.¹⁶

Barclay had a similar, expanded definition of *tekton* in mind when he wrote:

We slander Jesus a little when we call him a carpenter. He was what the Greeks call a tekton, and tekton, in Greek, meant early on – in Homer for instance – a shipbuilder. And the tekton was much more than a carpenter.¹⁷

Many have written descriptions of the specific items Jesus actually made or built.

Justin Martyr proposed that Jesus made “ploughs and yokes.”¹⁸ Mark Allen Powell states that Jesus’ trade “involved building parts of houses in addition to the fashioning of furniture.”¹⁹ Barclay posits that because, “A tekton was more than a carpenter; he was a craftsman who could build a wall or a house, construct a boat, or make a table or chair, or throw a bridge across a little stream.”²⁰ Sweet and Viola suggest that “Jesus spent no more than 10-20 percent of His time working with wood; the rest, with some stone and rocks.”²¹

The Gospels, however, provide little evidence for these assertions regarding the specific things that Jesus made. Jesus is simply described as a *tekton*, a son of a *tekton*, the son of Joseph and without education.

Interestingly, however, several scholars have found some possible evidence regarding Jesus’ specific work by analyzing His teaching. Cole notes: “Jesus rarely uses metaphors

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Barclay, 12.

¹⁸ Justin Martyr, Ch 88.

¹⁹ Powell, 136.

²⁰ Barclay, 87.

²¹ Leonard Sweet and Frank Viola, *Jesus Manifesto: Restoring the Supremacy and Sovereignty of Jesus Christ* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2010), 185.

derived from carpentry (but see Matt. 11:29), while He often uses those drawn from building.”²² Similarly, R. A. Batey notes that:

- Jesus likened those who heeded his words to a wise man who build his house on a rock;
- Jesus called special attention to eighteen men who died when the town of Siloam fell on them;
- Jesus mentions that a man built a tower in a vineyard;
- Jesus said ‘Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.’²³

Thus the twenty-nine occurrences in the Gospels where Jesus used the words *build* or *built* might point to His being a *builder* instead of a *carpenter*.²⁴ However, I believe this argument to be highly speculative, since Jesus also referred to his “yoke being easy” and “a beam in your brother’s eye” – both of which sound like words from the mouth of a carpenter.

Where did Jesus work?

Scholars have also debated the location of Jesus’ work. In all four of the Gospels, Jesus is referred to as “the Nazarene,” with numerous passages referring to Jesus “living in Nazareth”, “being brought up in Nazareth”, being “of Nazareth” and “leaving Nazareth.”²⁵

In recent years the city of Sepphoris has received attention among scholars as the likely location of Jesus’ work. Sepphoris was a city rebuilt by Herod, and with a population

²²R. Alan Cole, *Mark*. TNTC. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 168.

²³Batey, *Carpenter*, 255.

²⁴Matt. 5:14; 7:24, 7:26; 16:18; 21:33; 21:42; 23:29; 24:1; 27:40; Mark 12:1, 12:10;13:1, 13:2; 14:58; 15:29; Luke 6:48, 6:49; 11:47, 11:48; 12:18; 14:28, 14:30; 17:28; 19:43; 20:17; John 2:19.

²⁵Matt. 2:23; 4:13; 21:11; 26:71; Mark 1:9, 1:24; 10:47; 14:67; 16:6; Luke 2:39, 2:51; 4:16, 4:34; 18:37; 24:19; John 1:46; 18:5, 18:7; 19:19, (and “from Galilee” in John 7:52). For the multiple possibilities around “Nazarene” and “Nazoraean,” see F.F. Bruce, *New Testament History* (New York: Doubleday, 1969), 213-15.

of approximately 25,000 inhabitants, it was “the largest city in Galilee and the capital of (Herod’s) territories until he built Tiberias.”²⁶ As Dunn explains,

Sepphoris would have attracted villagers from the locality for trade and social outings and...the youthful Jesus would have visited Sepphoris, only two hours distant (5 km) from Nazareth by foot, perhaps even as a young carpenter assisting in the construction of its theatre.²⁷

Batey suggests that, “It requires no very daring flight of the imagination to picture the youthful Jesus seeking and finding employment in the neighboring city of Sepphoris.”²⁸ He further notes that, “The picture of Jesus presented in the Gospels is that of a man on the move....The mobility of Jesus indicates that numerous trips to Sepphoris were not just possible but very probable.”²⁹ Providing even more details, Jean-Pierre Isbouts asserts,

I do believe that sometime after Jesus reached his twelfth birthday...he and Joseph made their way to Sepphoris to join the throngs of peasants and workers in search of work. Whether this was entirely of their own volition or whether they had been conscripted into construction gangs, is not clear.³⁰

It is interesting that so much attention has been placed on the city of Sepphoris, even though Jesus was consistently referred to in the Gospels as being *from Nazareth*. In addition, it seems puzzling that if Jesus had indeed spent a significant amount of time in Sepphoris as a

²⁶ H.W. Hoehner, “Herodian Dynasty,” *The Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*: 323. The first scholar to propose that Jesus worked in Sepphoris was Shirley Jackson Case in an article entitled “Jesus and Sepphoris” in the *Journal of Biblical Literature* XLV (1926), 14-21.

²⁷ Dunn, 298.

²⁸ R.A. Batey, *Jesus and the Forgotten City: New Light on Sepphoris and the Urban World of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991), 70.

²⁹ Batey, *Carpenter*, 251.

³⁰ Jean-Pierre Isbouts, *Young Jesus: Restoring the ‘Lost Years’ of a Social Activist and Religious Dissident*. (New York: Serling, 2008), 123.

builder (or any other type of worker) why he did not return to the city to teach or do miracles. In fact there are no references in the Gospels to the city of Sepphoris.³¹

What are the implications of Jesus being a worker?

There is much debate among scholars as to the implications of Jesus being a worker prior to His public ministry.

Some have argued that by working, Jesus came into contact with teachers who aided his future public ministry. Isbouts, for example, asserts that when Jesus and Joseph were in Sepphoris, Joseph was the victim of a construction accident and died. And thus, the orphaned Jesus had the opportunity to be educated by the substantial Pharisaic community in the city. He writes,

Why would some of the Pharisees have taken this young boy under their wing? The answer may be that Jesus had recently lost his father. What's more, the young Jesus was an intelligent, inquisitive, and attentive young man.³²

Similarly, Douglas Oakman argues that Jesus' vocational work provided a motivation for his public ministry. Patrick Hartin summarizes Oakman's views by explaining that "Jesus as an artisan (was) responding to the economic pressures of his day."³³

³¹ Batey provides one reason for Jesus avoiding Sepphoris during his ministry—the possibility of arrest by Herod Antipas in the city. He explains that "Soon after Jesus began preaching throughout the cities and villages of Galilee, Herod Antipas imprisoned John the Baptist at Machaerus and beheaded him (Luke 3:19-20)." Later, after Jesus' arrest in Jerusalem, Batey explains from Luke 23:6-17, "Pilate sent him over to be questioned by Antipas, who had desired for some time to see Jesus. Jesus remained silent during the interrogation. Antipas treated him with contempt and with his soldiers mocked Jesus before returning him in gorgeous apparel to Pilate without a charge. This was a poignant meeting of two men who for some time had known each other by reputation, even though they had lived just six kilometers apart for most of their lives", (Batey, *Carpenter*, 254).

³² Isbouts, 129.

³³ Patrick J. Hartin and J.H. Petzer, *Text and Interpretation: New Approaches in the Criticism of the New Testament* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1991), 218. (C.f., Douglas E. Oakman, *Jesus and the Economic Questions of His Day* (Lewiston, NY: Mellon, 1986). Oakman argues that "Agrarian debt was pushing peasantry of Jesus' day either entirely off the land (wage labor on estates) or into client-dependency relations on the land via-a-vis the Roman overlord (e.g. Caesar's large estates in the Esdraelon Plain or the land controlled by

These arguments are unconvincing to those who believe in the deity of Christ as revealed in Scripture. If Jesus were merely human, there would need to be some explanation (like that presented by Isbouts) as to how Christ was able to acquire such knowledge to be such a persuasive teacher, or (like that presented by Oakman) how He had such a strong motivation to conduct a very controversial ministry that He was willing to die for.

The Gospels (as well as the other books of the NT), however, present Jesus as fully divine, co-eternal with the Father, and sharing in the nature of the Godhead:

- “in the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” (John 1:1)
- “I tell you the truth,” Jesus answered, “before Abraham was born, I am!” (John 8:58)
- Jesus said, “I and the Father are one.” (John 10:30)

As God the Son, the second member of the Trinity, Jesus is able to forgive sins, do what His Father was doing, and be worshiped as Lord (Mark 2:5; John 5:19; Matt. 14:33).

Others have argued that Jesus’ work was a source of embarrassment for Jesus and His followers. Thus, they reason, the Gospel writers avoided the subject. John Dominic Crossan makes this assertion when stating that “Matthew and Luke rephrase their Markan source.”³⁴ He explains that “each in its own way avoids saying that Jesus was a carpenter” because it was a “Markan embarrassment” which neither Matthew or Luke deemed “an appropriate designation for Jesus.”³⁵ Similarly, Richardson says that carpenter has “a derogatory sound”

Judean-Herodian aristocrats in Sepphoris-Tiberias). The insecurity of the tenant or wage laborer was evidenced in the increase in beggary and brigandage. Brigands perhaps would have been more impressed by a zealot-like religious movement, but the ministry of Jesus, which clearly shows concern for the beggar and disadvantaged, sought alternate ways to resolve class tensions and reconcile class interests.” Douglas E. Oakman “The Lord’s Prayer in Social Context”, *Authenticating the Words of Jesus*, Bruce Chilton and Craig A. Evans, eds. (Leiden: Brill, 1999), 164.

³⁴ John Dominic Crossan, *The Birth of Christianity* (New York: Harper Collins, 1999), 349.

³⁵ Crossan, 349-350.

and that Matthew “for motives of reverence *alters*” the reference in Mark, while the Lukan and Johannine accounts neglect it altogether.³⁶ Bruce Malina and Richard Rohrbaugh concur that Jesus’ work would have been embarrassing to Jesus and His followers because the vocation of *tekton* was held in contempt by religious Jews and others in Jesus’ day:

In asking if Jesus is the craftsman’s son, the synagogue participants are questioning how such astounding teaching could come from one born to a manual craftsman (one working in stone or wood). By Jesus’ time such craftsmen were often itinerant, especially those living in villages or small towns. Like all itinerants who did not stay home to protect their women and family honor, they were considered persons ‘without shame’.³⁷

Although there is some evidence that Jesus’ vocation was not named in the original texts (Origin in the third century noted that “in none of the Gospels current in the Churches is Jesus Himself ever described as a carpenter”³⁸), I find this argument regarding Jesus’ embarrassing vocation unconvincing for several reasons: First, an account of Jesus’ vocation is actually *in* two of the four Gospels. If it were true that Jesus’ work was an utter embarrassment to His disciples or the Gospel writers, it stands to reason that the information regarding his vocation would have been redacted – which did not happen in two of the four Gospels. Second, I fail to see how Jesus’ vocation could have been “more embarrassing” to his disciples or the Gospel writers than the rest of his earthly existence – all described in the Gospels. The people of Jesus’ day were expecting an exalted militaristic leader, a hero to rescue them from Roman oppression, and instead Jesus came to them as one born in a stable,

³⁶ Alan Richardson, *The Biblical Doctrine of Work* (London: SCM, 1952), 31.

³⁷ Bruce J. Malina and Richard L. Rohrbaugh, *Social-Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), 212.

³⁸ Origin, “Contra Celsus”, Bk. 6, Ch. 36, in *The Ante-Nicene Christian Library* (London: T&T Clark, 1885).

lacking worldly pedigree, status, wealth or education, teaching about God's Kingdom, and suffering as a humble servant.³⁹

Thus, with this expectation held by so many of Jesus' contemporaries, it stands to reason that if the Gospel writers were to edit information about Jesus' past, they would have edited more than simply his vocation. Yet nothing in the Gospel's presentation of Jesus' life prior to or during his public ministry pointed to anything resembling the Davidic militaristic messianic expectations of his culture.

Still other scholars have argued that there is *no* significance to Christ's vocation prior to public ministry. John P. Meier posits:

[Before] his baptism by John, Jesus was a respectable, unexceptional, and unnoticed woodworker in Nazareth. Both family and neighbors were shocked and offended by Jesus once he undertook his ministry, and not without reason. Apparently there was nothing in his previous life that foreshadowed or ostensibly prepared for his decision to dedicate himself totally (to ministry).⁴⁰

Thus, in Meier's view "nothing much happened" prior to Jesus entering public ministry.⁴¹ Similarly, Richardson explains that,

St. John ignores entirely the fact that Jesus Christ had been a worker, a craftsman, and indeed he cannot in this matter be sharply marked off from the Synoptic writers, for they are not particularly interested in it. The Gospel writers pass over in complete silence the years in which our Lord worked in Nazareth as an artisan; they tell no stories to bring out the meaning of his work as craftsman comparable to the many stories which they tell about his activity as a preacher, healer (etc.) in all of which they perceive profound significance. For them *the* work of Jesus is not his work as craftsman but as redeemer of the world.⁴²

While I agree that the Gospel writers are primarily interested in Jesus' public ministry, I think Richardson misses the point, since Jesus' vocation is indeed mentioned (or

³⁹ For Davidic messianic expectations, see F.F. Bruce, 133. See also Martin's translation of the *Psalms of Solomon* on the expectations of a Davidic king who would exercise military authority: Ralph Martin, *New Testament Foundations* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), 1:107ff.

⁴⁰ John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Mentor, Message and Miracle* (New York: Doubleday, 1994), 109.

⁴¹ Powell, 136.

⁴² Richardson, 30-31.

implied) in two of the Gospel accounts. In addition, from the Gospel accounts, it is clear that Jesus' disciples had no personal knowledge of Jesus prior to his public ministry, thus in their desire to be faithful witnesses in providing a testimony to others regarding what they had seen and heard, the events of Jesus' life prior to His call upon their lives could not be witnessed or attested to.

The best argument, I believe, that relates to the significance of Jesus' vocation is that it displays *the condescension of God*; that God would willingly descend to, be among, and reveal Himself to His people. Herman Bavnick explains,

To see God face to face is for us impossible, at least here on earth. If, nevertheless, God wills that we should know him, he must needs descend to the level of the creature. He must needs accommodate himself to our limited, finite, human consciousness. He must speak to us in human language.⁴³

Similarly, Louis Berkhof has noted that, "If God had not revealed himself, religion would have been impossible. Man could not possibly have had any knowledge of God, if God had not made Himself known."⁴⁴

This condescension is seen in the *incarnation*, in which, according to Bavnick, "the entire revelation of God becomes concentrated in the Word, who becomes flesh."⁴⁵

According to James Montgomery Boice, "Jesus, by means of the Incarnation, came to know the vicissitudes of life: trials, joys, sufferings, losses, gains, temptations, griefs."⁴⁶

We learn in Scripture that Jesus came to redeem His people and in doing so, laid aside His divine majesty and assumed the form of a servant. Paul explained that, Christ Jesus,

⁴³ Herman Bavnick, *The Doctrine of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1951), 91.

⁴⁴ Louis Berkhof, *A Summary of Christian Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1938), 5.

⁴⁵ Bavnick, 86.

⁴⁶ James Montgomery Boice, *God the Redeemer* (Downers Gove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1978), 146.

being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death—even death on a cross! (Phil. 2:6-8)

Christ’s obedience meant suffering not only in death, but also during His life on earth, as Berkhof clarifies, “We sometimes speak as if the suffering of Christ were limited to His final agonies, but this is not correct. His whole life was a life of suffering.”⁴⁷

In terms of work, it means too that Jesus knew work and workers. According to Barclay,

This of course means that Jesus was a working man. He knew the awkward narky customer, he knew the man who wouldn’t pay his bills, he knew the kind of day when the devil got into the wood and the chisel and the saw, and when nothing would go right. He had done a day’s work.⁴⁸

The Work of Christ in Public Ministry

In contrast with providing only minimal information about the work of Christ prior to His public ministry, the Gospels provide much information regarding the work of Christ in His public ministry. In fact, Jesus used the word “work” extensively in John’s Gospel to describe His *work*:

- “My food,” said Jesus, “is to do the will of him who sent me and to finish his *work*.” (John 4:34, emphasis added)
- Jesus said to them, “My Father is always at his *work* to this very day, and I too am *working*.” (John 5:17, emphasis added)
- Jesus said to them, “I have shown you many good *works* from the Father. For which of these do you stone me?” (John 10:32, emphasis added)⁴⁹

⁴⁷ Berkhof, 76-77.

⁴⁸ Barclay, 13.

⁴⁹ *Cf.*, John 5:36; 6:29; 9:4; 10:25, 10:37, 10:38; 14:10, 14:11; 15:24 and 17:4.

The Greek word for “work” in these verses is ἔργον (*ergon*) and its derivatives.⁵⁰ BDAG defines *ergon* as “work, occupation, task.”⁵¹ Louw and Nida describe *ergon* as “work” or “workmanship - the result of someone’s activity or work.”⁵²

Graham Twelftree explains that the word *ergon* appears twenty-seven times in John’s Gospel. Nineteen of these occurrences refer to the work of Christ, while the other eighteen occurrences are used by Jesus to refer to His Father’s work.⁵³

Christ’s work assignment (also described by scholars as His *Messianic vocation*), is not unique to John’s Gospel; it provides an important overarching theme (or a *metanarrative*, as literary critics might identify it) that runs throughout all four of the Gospels.⁵⁴

What Was the Work of Christ?

Each of the Gospels provides a similar description of the work of Christ. In John’s Gospel, for example, we learn that when John the Baptist first saw Jesus, he declared: “Behold the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world” (John 1:29). And in Mark’s Gospel we learn that Jesus said of Himself that the Son of Man came “to give his life for the ransom of many” (Mark 10:45).

In a sentence, the work of Christ can be described as the vicarious, substitutionary and sacrificial atonement that Jesus freely offered through His death on the Cross to redeem

⁵⁰ Barth makes a distinction between “faith and obedience” which he calls *ergon* and *parergon* which he refers to as “work” (i.e. labor). It should be noted here that the Gospels do not make this linguistic distinction. (Barth, *Church Dogmatics* III, 516-525).

⁵¹ BDAG, 308.

⁵² Louw and Nida, 514.

⁵³ Graham H. Twelftree, *Jesus the Miracle Worker: A Historical and Theological Study* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1999), 225.

⁵⁴ Although I believe the terms “work assignment” and “Messianic vocation” can be important terms in identifying the work of Christ in the Gospels, a recent internet search resulted in no matches for documents that use both terms. (“Work assignment” + “Messianic vocation” search conducted on 1/5/11 via Google.com).

His people.⁵⁵ Christ, through His own volition, was punished in place of sinners. Through His death on the Cross, Jesus satisfied God’s demand for justice so that the sins of His people would be forgiven. This work of Christ leads to Christ’s imputed righteousness and eternal life with God for those whom God redeems and punishment for those who are not redeemed.

The work assignment (or Messianic vocation) of Christ, as revealed in the Gospels, had several distinctive elements:

1. a divine work assignment from the Father
2. a work assignment that was embraced by Christ
3. work motivated by love
4. work that was Spirit enabled
5. work that had several important components and tasks
6. work in which the tasks testified to the overall work assignment
7. a work assignment that led to conflicts when people attempted to stop the work
8. work that was time delimited
9. work that leads to death
10. work that demands a response

A Divine Work Assignment from the Father

Jesus consistently affirmed in the Gospels that He was *sent* by His Father to do the Father’s work:

- “I...testify that the Father *has sent me*.” (John 5:36, emphasis added)
- “anyone who welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me.” (Matt. 10:40)⁵⁶

⁵⁵ *Cf.*, Chapter VIII *Westminster Confession of Faith*; Article XI *39 Articles of Religion*; Part II, Article VIII *Canons of Dort*.

⁵⁶ The verses listed here are only a few of the instances where Jesus affirmed that He was sent. See also: Mark 9:37; Luke 4:18; 9:48; 10:16; John 4:34; 5:23; 6:39, 6:44, 6:57; 7:18, 7:28, 7:29; 8:16, 8:18, 8:26, 8:28, 8:42; 9:4; 10:36; 12:44, 12:45, 12:49; 13:20; 14:24; 15:21; 16:5; 17:3, 17:8, 17:18, 17:21, 17:23, 17:25; and 20:21.

His work in this context then, in the words of John MacArthur, is not “labor in general” but a “divinely assigned job.”⁵⁷

As one who was sent, Jesus affirms numerous times that his teaching was not his own but from His Father:

- “My teaching is *not my own*. It comes from the one who sent me.” (John 7:16, emphasis added)
- “This command *I received from my Father*” (John 10:18, emphasis added)
- “these words you hear are *not my own*; they belong to the Father who sent me.” (John 14:24, emphasis added)
- “My teaching is *not mine*” (John 17:16, emphasis added)

In addition to teaching, Jesus affirmed that He could only *do* “what the Father was doing”, explaining:

- “the Son can do nothing of Himself; he can do only what he sees his Father doing, because whatever the Father does the Son also does.” (John 5:19)
- “by myself I can do nothing...I seek not to please myself but him who sent me.” (John 5:30)

John Stott points out that even though Christ’s work assignment was from God His Father, it did not diminish His person as God or His authority to teach the truth:

It is true that he described his doctrine as being not his but the Father’s who had sent him. Nevertheless, he knew himself to be such an immediate means of divine revelation as to be able to speak with great personal assurance. He never hesitated or apologized. He had no need to contradict, withdraw or modify anything he said...He asserted that his words were as eternal as the law, and would never pass away.⁵⁸

Jesus’ divine assignment, we learn, was not a sudden development, but rather, something that had always been part of God’s plans and purposes because the Son was with

⁵⁷ John MacArthur, *Ephesians: New Testament Commentary* (Chicago: Moody, 1986), 285.

⁵⁸ John R. W. Stott, *Basic Christianity* (London: InterVarsity, 1958), 30-31.

the Father “even before the creation of the world” (John 17:24). Each of the Gospels declare that Jesus and His work assignment were predicted many centuries beforehand. Matthew, for example, provides the genealogy of Jesus, tracing His lineage back to Abraham in fulfillment of promises given to Abraham in the book of Genesis (Matt. 1:1-17).⁵⁹ In addition, the Gospel writers point out that the OT prophesied that the Messiah would:

- be born of a Virgin and be named Immanuel (which means “God with us”);⁶⁰
- be born in Bethlehem and the Messiah and his parents would escape to Egypt;⁶¹
- be from the house of David and God’s Son;⁶²
- have a predecessor who would “prepare the way” (i.e. John the Baptist);⁶³
- bring healing;⁶⁴
- be a servant;⁶⁵
- speak in parables;⁶⁶
- still have people not believe in him, even after performing signs/miracles;⁶⁷
- ride into Jerusalem on a donkey;⁶⁸
- see children praise Him;⁶⁹
- be zealous regarding the purity of the Temple;⁷⁰

⁵⁹ Promises were given to Abraham in Gen. 12:3, 21:12. Similarly, the Lukan account (Luke 3:23-38) traces Jesus’ genealogy to Adam.

⁶⁰ Isa. 7:14, quoted in Matt. 1:23.

⁶¹ Micah 5:2, 4, quoted in Matt. 2:6, and Hos. 11:1 quoted in Matt. 2:15.

⁶² Ps. 110:1, quoted in Mark 12:36 and Luke 20:43.

⁶³ Isa. 40:3-5, quoted in Matt. 3:3; Mark 1:3; Luke 3:6 and John 1:23. In addition, Mal. 3:1 is quoted in Matt. 11:10; Mark 1:2 and Luke 7:27.

⁶⁴ Isa. 53:4, quoted in Matt. 8:17.

⁶⁵ Isa. 42:1-4, quoted in Matt. 12:18-21, Isa. 42:1 quoted in John 1:34.

⁶⁶ Ps. 78:2, quoted in Matt. 13:35 and Isa. 6:9,10 in Mark 4:12 and Luke 8:10.

⁶⁷ Isa. 53:1 and 6:10, quoted in John 12:37-40.

⁶⁸ Zech. 9:9, quoted in John 12:15.

⁶⁹ Ps. 8:2, quoted in Matt. 21:16.

- be rejected and “hated without reason;”⁷¹
- be betrayed;⁷²
- have his clothes divided by men who cast lots for them;⁷³
- not break any bones;⁷⁴
- be pierced and looked upon;⁷⁵
- be struck down and his disciples scatter.⁷⁶

Thus, the Gospel writers affirmed that Jesus was *the fulfillment* of the OT prophecies and expectations.⁷⁷ And as Ladd notes, it was not just the Gospel writers who saw in Jesus the fulfillment of OT expectations, Jesus himself, “claimed to be the one who was fulfilling the messianic promises of the OT (and) through whom the Kingdom of God is present in the world.”⁷⁸

Even in His baptism, as Jesus began His public ministry, we can observe His messianic vocation. Unlike the people who came to John the Baptist for the repentance of sins, because Jesus was not a finite sinful human, His baptism took on a wholly different meaning – an inaugural of a divine assignment. According to Edgar Mullins,

⁷⁰ Ps. 69:9, quoted in John 2:17.

⁷¹ Ps. 118:22,23, quoted in Matt. 21:42, Mark 12:11 and Luke 20:17. (Similarly Ps. 35:19 and 69:4 is quoted in John 15:25).

⁷² Ps. 41:9, quoted in John 13:18.

⁷³ Ps. 22:18, quoted in John 19:24.

⁷⁴ Exod. 12:46; Num. 9:12 and Ps. 34:20, quoted in John 19:36.

⁷⁵ Zech. 12:10, quoted in John 19:37.

⁷⁶ Zech. 13:7, quoted in Mark 14:27.

⁷⁷ It is interesting to observe the many times Matthew uses the phrase “This was fulfilled what was spoken through the prophet....”

⁷⁸ George Eldon Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 142. Ladd quotes as examples Luke 4:21 (where Jesus reads from Isa 61:1,2 and 58:6 and says “Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing”). *C.f.*, Luke 11:20; Matt. 11:4-5; 12:28.

His baptism was not a confession of sin, but a self-dedication to righteousness and to his Messianic vocation.⁷⁹

At His baptism, we learn an important point about Jesus' identity: that God did not send an angel or messenger to fulfill the work assignment, but rather He sent His own Son (Matt. 3:17; Mark 1:11; Luke 3:22).⁸⁰ As God's Son, Jesus was called *God's chosen one* and the Lord's *Messiah* (which means "the Anointed One" and was also translated as *Christ*).⁸¹ Ladd notes that, "so important was the category of messiahship that *Christos* was converted into a proper name."⁸² Thus, we read in the Gospels the name of Him whom the Father assigned the divine work: *Jesus Christ*.

Interestingly, Jesus did not refer to himself as *Messiah* but preferred instead the title: *Son of Man*. According to J. P. Sheraton even this title described Christ's person and His divine work assignment:

The designation 'Son of Man' has a double reference: first, to our Lord's nature, and secondly, to His work... In regard to His work, it clearly implied His Messianic vocation, but lifted it above its Jewish limitations and gave it a world-wide application. While our Lord generally avoided the term 'Messiah', because of the false ideas associated with it by the Jews, He found the designation "Son of Man" a true expression of His own Messianic consciousness and mission which it at once asserted and concealed. Thus, as Holtzmann says, 'it was a riddle to those who heard it, and served to veil, not to reveal, His Messiahship.'⁸³

⁷⁹ Edgar Young Mullins, *The Christian Religion and its Doctrinal Expression* (Philadelphia: Roger Williams, 1917), 157.

⁸⁰ Jesus' identity as God's Son is also later identified at The Transfiguration (Matt. 17:5; Mark 9:2; Luke 9:35).

⁸¹ For *the Lord's Chosen* see Matt. 12:18; Luke 9:35; John 1:34. For *God's Messiah* see Matt. 1:1, 1:16, 1:18; 16:16; Mark 1:1; 8:29; Luke 2:11, 2:26; 4:41; 9:20; 24:46; John 1:41; 7:41; 20:31.

⁸² Ladd, *Theology*, 142.

⁸³ J.P. Sheraton, "Our Lord's Teaching Concerning Himself," *Princeton Theological Review* 1 (1903): 527-528.

A Work Assignment that Was Embraced by Christ

Even though He was God, Jesus declined to save Himself from His assignment of suffering and death but willingly embraced the work that His Father had given to Him. He taught:

- “The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life for the ransom of many” (Matt. 20:28; Mark 10:45)
- “I came down from heaven *not to do my own will* but the will of the one who sent me.” (John 6:38, emphasis added)

Jesus affirmed that He was not passively accepting what others on earth were doing to Him but actively obeying His Father. He explained, “no one takes (my life) from me, but I lay it down of my own accord” (John 10:18). This active obedience can also be observed at His death, as Jesus prayed, “Father, into your hands I commit my spirit.”⁸⁴

In a similar manner, Jesus taught His disciples to submit to their Father’s Lordship by praying “your will be done” as he would pray at His crucifixion, “not my will, but yours be done” (Matt. 6:10; Luke 22:42).

Work Motivated by Love

A number of passages in the Gospels point to the *motivation* (of the Father and the Son) concerning Christ’s work assignment and His Messianic vocation. The Gospels declare that the Father loves the Son:

- A voice came from heaven and explained, “You are my son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.” (Mark 1:11; *C.f.*, Matt. 3:17; 17:5; Mark 9:7; Luke 3:22)
- “Here is my servant whom I have chosen, the one I love, in whom I delight.” (Matt. 12:18; *C.f.*, John 3:35; 5:20; 10:17; 17:24)

⁸⁴ Jesus is quoting Ps. 31:5 in Luke 23:46.

And out of His great love for the world, God the Father sent His Son to the world:

- “For God so *loved the world* that He gave His one and only Son” (John 3:16, emphasis added)
- Jesus prayed to his Father, “then the world will know that *you sent me and have loved them* even as you have loved me.” (John 17:23, emphasis added)

Love and compassion were also Jesus’ motivation in accomplishing His divinely assigned task, “When he saw the crowds, he had *compassion* on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep with a shepherd” (Matt. 9:36). As John Murray explains, “It must be regarded, therefore, as a settled datum that the love of God is the cause or source of the atonement.”⁸⁵ Murray further comments that this was not something foisted upon God and Christ, but rather,

It was the free and sovereign good pleasure of his will, a good pleasure that emanated from the depths of his own goodness, that he chose a people to be heirs of God and joint-heirs with Christ.⁸⁶

Work that Was Spirit Enabled

The Gospels also describe Jesus’ work as enabled by the power of the Holy Spirit. Mary, for example, was found to be pregnant by the power of the Holy Spirit (Matt. 1:18; *C.f.*, Matt. 1:20, Luke 1:35). At Jesus’ baptism we learn that the Holy Spirit came upon Him (Matt. 3:16; Mark 1:10; Luke 3:22; John 1:32). And even when He was tempted in the wilderness, Jesus was “full of the Spirit” and “led by the Holy Spirit” (Matt. 4:1; Mark 1:12; Luke 4:1). After His testing in the wilderness, Jesus began working in “the power of the Holy Spirit” (Luke 4:14) and after He commissioned His disciples for work and they returned, Jesus was “full of joy through the Holy Spirit” (Luke 10:21). In Matthew’s Gospel, we see

⁸⁵ John Murray, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1955), 10-11.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 10.

that Jesus' ministry was the fulfillment of the OT prophesy in Isaiah, where God promised, "I will put my Spirit on him." (Matt. 12:18)

Jesus noted too that the Holy Spirit "anointed" Him and empowered Him for His divine work assignment and in his work, Jesus explained, "the Spirit of the Lord is on me" (Luke 4:18). It is for this reason that Jesus was able to say, "The one who sent me is with me; he has not left me alone" (John 8:29). Thus, we see a consistent affirmation in the Gospels that Jesus' work assignment was Spirit empowered.

Work that Had Several Important Components and Tasks

In reading the Gospels, it is clear that Jesus had several important tasks that God the Father planned for Him to accomplish in order to fulfill His Messianic vocation. Jesus knew He had to:

- Present salvation to His hearers by teaching and preaching the *Gospel* (the Good News of salvation)⁸⁷
- Forgive sins⁸⁸
- Usher in God's kingdom⁸⁹
- Perform miracles:
 - Heal the sick⁹⁰
 - Cast out demons⁹¹

⁸⁷ Matt. 4:23, 5:2, 9:35, 11:1, 11:5, 13:54, 21:23; Mark 1:14, 4:2, 6:6, 6:34, 12:35; Luke 4:15, 4:18, 4:43, 5:17, 6:6, 7:22, 8:1, 13:10, 19:47, 20:1, 21:37; John 6:59, 7:28, 8:20.

⁸⁸ Matt. 9:2, 26:28; Mark 2:5, 2:10; Luke 5:20, 7:48.

⁸⁹ Matt. 3:2, 4:17; Mark 1:14-15; Luke 1:33, 4:43, 8:1, 9:11, 10:9; John 18:36.

⁹⁰ *Cf.*, Matt. 8:2-4, 8:5-13, 8:14-15, 9:2-7, 9:20-22, 9:27-31, 9:32-33, 12:10-13, 12:22, 15:21-28, 17:14-18, 20:29-34; Mark 1:23-26, 1:40-42, 1:30-31, 3:1-5, 5:1-15, 2:3-12, 5:25-29, 7:24-30, 7:31-37, 8:22-26, 9:17-29, 10:46-52; Luke 4:33-35, 4:38-39, 5:12-13, 5:17-25, 6:6-10, 7:1-10, 8:43-48, 9:38-43, 11:14, 13:11-13, 14:1-4, 17:11-19, 18:35-43, 22:50-51; John 4:46-54, 5:1-9.

⁹¹ Mark 5:8.

- Perform miracles over nature⁹²
- Work with disciples
 - Call/recruit⁹³
 - Train⁹⁴
 - Send⁹⁵
- Be the Lord of the Sabbath⁹⁶
- Die on a Cross⁹⁷
- Baptize followers with the Holy Spirit⁹⁸
- Eventually judge humanity⁹⁹

In these tasks, Jesus made it clear that *He was God*. As N. T. Wright explains,

“His messianic vocation included within it the vocation to attempt certain tasks which, according to scripture, YHWH had reserved for himself. He would take upon himself the role of messianic shepherd, knowing that YHWH had claimed this role as his own. He would perform the saving task which YHWH had said he alone could achieve. He would do what no messenger, no angel, but only the ‘arm of YHWH’, the presence of Israel’s God, could accomplish.”¹⁰⁰

Thus, in these tasks not only was Jesus doing the will of the Father, He was doing work that God had reserved for Himself.

⁹² Matt. 8:23, 14:22ff, 15:29ff, Mark 4:35-41, 8:1ff, Luke 9:10ff, John 2:1ff.

⁹³ Matt. 4:18ff, 9:9, Mark 1:16-20, Luke 5:1-11, John 1:39-50.

⁹⁴ Matt. 11:1.

⁹⁵ Matt. 10:1ff; Mark 6:6ff, 16:15; Luke 9:2, 10:1ff.

⁹⁶ Matt. 12:8, Mark 2:28, Luke 6:5.

⁹⁷ Matt. 27; Mark 15; Luke 23; John 19.

⁹⁸ Matt. 3:11, Mark 1:8, Luke 3:16, John 1:33.

⁹⁹ Matt. 19:28, 25:31; John 5:22, 5:27, 9:39, 12:31.

¹⁰⁰ N.T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1996), 653.

Work in which the Tasks Testified to the Overall Work Assignment

As Jesus performed his work, He made it clear that He was not performing tasks that were independent of each other, but rather tasks that pointed to His larger, overall work assignment. Jesus explained, “the works I do in my Father’s name testify about me” (John 10:25). For those (apparently) struggling with believing that He was Messiah, he told them:

- “even though you do not believe me, believe the works, that you may know and understand that the Father is in me, and I in the Father.” (John 10:38)
- “Believe me when I say that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; or at least believe on the evidence of the *works* themselves.” (John 14:11, emphasis added)

The tasks (or *works* as Jesus referred to them) therefore, pointed to who Jesus was and what He was accomplishing on earth.

This view is evident in Jesus’ response to the disciples of John the Baptist after Jesus was sent a message by John the Baptist asking Him if He was in fact the Messiah (Matt. 11:3). As Bertram notes, John the Baptist found it hard to “correlate” the works of Jesus with Jesus’ overall mission.¹⁰¹ And so, Jesus sent back this message:

Go back and report to John, what you hear and see: the blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is proclaimed to the poor. (Matt. 11:4-5)

Thus, in His responses, Jesus was telling John’s disciples that His individual tasks (of healing, doing miraculous signs and preaching the Gospel) pointed both to who He was and what His mission was. As A. B. Bruce explains, the message back to John the Baptist had “for its object to prove that He who sent it was the Christ.”¹⁰²

¹⁰¹ G. Bertram, “Work-Ergon,” *Theological Dictionary of the NT*, 1: 252.

¹⁰² Alexander Balmain Bruce, *The Miraculous Element in the Gospels* (New York: Armstrong, 1886), 248.

Similarly, in John's Gospel, as a result of Jesus' ministry tasks, Nicodemus declared, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the signs you are doing if God were not with him" (John 3:2). Bertram summarizes,

In John ('s Gospel)...the works bear witness to Jesus and the salvation that he brings. They do so, not just as mighty or glorious works, but as good works that display God's working both as his work in Jesus and as the work he has entrusted to him. The unity of God's saving work is always in the background (*C.f.*, 9:3, 17:4).¹⁰³

Another example in John's Gospel occurred when the disciples saw Jesus' first public miracle of turning water into wine. This miracle served as a sign to Jesus' Messianic glory and vocation, as John declares:

This, the first of his miraculous signs, Jesus performed in Cana of Galilee. He thus revealed his glory, and his disciples put their faith in him. (John 2:11)

Thus for the disciples, this specific task pointed to who Christ was and the work assignment that He was to accomplish.

A Work Assignment that Led to Conflicts When People Attempted to Stop the Work

The Gospels describe many individuals and entities: Satan, the crowds, religious leaders and even Jesus' disciples who attempted to stop Jesus from completing His divine work assignment. As Barry Gordon explains,

much of the drama of the gospels turns around the efforts of Jesus to get his work done despite repeated frustrations from a variety of quarters. Jesus has been given a job specification by his Father. He is determined to act in terms of it. Friends, family, disciples, and the Establishment continually seek to weaken his resolve in this respect, but he holds to the general drift of the specification.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰³ Bertram, 252.

¹⁰⁴ Barry J. Gordon, *The Economic Problem in Biblical and Patristic Thought* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1989), 47.

The Gospels describe King Herod as the first to try to stop Jesus, however, with a warning from an angel, Jesus' family fled to Egypt (Matt. 2:13). Next, Satan attempted to stop Jesus when He was in the wilderness (Matt. 4:1-11; *C.f.*, Mark 1:12-13). After Jesus had prayed and fasted for forty days and nights, the Devil gave him three tests (or temptations). Boice and other scholars have identified the third temptation of Christ by Satan as a *vocational temptation*:

He knew that Jesus was to receive the kingdoms of this world for his glory; it had been prophesied in the OT. 'Ask of me, and I will make the nations your heritage, and the ends of the earth your possession. ' (Ps. 2:8). But the way to that inheritance was the cross, and Satan now argued that Jesus could obtain it without suffering... Jesus rejected Satan's offer and instead set his face to go in the way that God had set before him.¹⁰⁵

As soon as Jesus began His public ministry, the Gospels explain that many religious leaders began to oppose His work and attempted to stop Him. In his analysis of Mark's Gospel, Kingsbury explains that, "Mark's story of Jesus is a story of *conflict* between Jesus and Israel, made up of the crowd and the religious authorities."¹⁰⁶ Their attempts to stop Jesus' work (and hasten His death) began as soon as the religious leaders saw him breaking what they believed were the Mosaic Laws regarding the Sabbath, declaring His authority as God and forgiving sins. They said, "...not only was he breaking the Sabbath, but he was even calling God his own Father, making himself equal with God" (John 5:18; *C.f.*, Mark 2:6-7).¹⁰⁷ The religious leaders even made plans to kill Lazarus who could testify about Jesus' work because Christ had raised him from the dead.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁵ Boice, 146. *C.f.*, William Willimon, "Vocational Temptation" *Theology Today* 52, no. 1 (April, 1995): 101.

¹⁰⁶ Jack Dean Kingsbury, *Conflict in Mark* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989), 28.

¹⁰⁷ Jesus responds to the religious leaders by explaining, "I came not to call the righteous but the sinners" (Mark 2:17).

¹⁰⁸ John 12:10.

The problem with the religious leaders' views regarding the Sabbath, it should be noted, is that Jesus did not see God as being idle on the Sabbath, but rather, Jesus was working because His Father "was working" (John 8:41, 42, 44).

In contrast to the work that Jesus was doing on behalf of His Father, Jesus explained to the religious leaders that in their attempts to stop His work, they were in fact doing the work of *their* spiritual father, telling them, "You belong to your father, the devil, and you want to carry out your father's desires" (John 5:17).

In addition to the religious leaders attempting to stop Jesus' work, several of Jesus' disciples attempted to stop His work as well. Upon hearing that Jesus had to suffer and die, Peter attempted to stop Jesus by saying, "Never Lord! This shall never happen to you!" But Jesus rebuked him saying, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; you do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns" (Matt. 16:22-23). In addition, the Gospels describe Judas Iscariot's betrayal of Christ by turning Him over to the chief priests (Matt. 26:14ff).

Kingsbury notes that these conflicts in the Gospels occurred, in part, because of how these different entities viewed Jesus,

the religious authorities look upon Jesus as the agent of Satan...in Nazareth, Jesus' family, relatives and acquaintances cannot believe that he is anyone other than the carpenter, the son of Mary...Herod Antipas chooses to regard Jesus as John the Baptist, whom he beheaded come back to life...similarly, the Jewish crowd too regards Jesus as a prophet.¹⁰⁹

Kingsbury adds positively however, that this conflict will not persist for all time – it has and will come to a resolution:

¹⁰⁹ Kingsbury, 5-6. The verses in Mark he notes are: 3:22,30, 6:3, 6:14-16 and 8:28.

...the force driving the story forward is the element of conflict. In Jesus' death and resurrection, the conflict of the story comes to fundamental resolution. In Jesus' Parousia, it will come to final resolution.¹¹⁰

Work that Was Time-Delimited

The Gospels are clear that Jesus' work was time-delimited.¹¹¹ Jesus' work assignment had a clear beginning and an end. After His baptism and testing in the wilderness, Jesus went to Galilee to begin his public ministry and "From that time on Jesus began to preach" (Matt. 4:17).¹¹²

During His public ministry, Jesus affirmed several times that there was work to do before his crucifixion, because: "My hour/time has not yet come" (John 2:4).¹¹³ Then, just before His death, we learn that an element of Jesus' work assignment was complete as He affirms that "the hour has come" (John 12:23).¹¹⁴ And finally, on the cross Jesus declared, "It is finished" (John 19:30).

Mark Stibbe explains that Jesus' words on the Cross demonstrate that His work had a prescribed time limit for the completion of his work:

Jesus' cry at the Cross, 'it is finished', reveals that Calvary marks the completion of Jesus' mission and the fulfillment of the divinely commissioned task.¹¹⁵

Work that Leads to Death

The work assignment given to Jesus was unique. It was an assignment that only He could perform and fulfill because of who He was. Because Christ was both perfectly God

¹¹⁰ Kingsbury, 28.

¹¹¹ *C.f.*, John 7:33. In addition to being limited by time, Jesus explained that his work assignment was ethnically and geographically limited. Jesus explained, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel" (Matt. 15:24).

¹¹² *C.f.*, Mark 1:14, Luke 3:23.

¹¹³ *C.f.*, John 7:6, 7:30, 8:20.

¹¹⁴ *C.f.*, John 13:1, 17:1, Mark 14:35.

¹¹⁵ Mark W. G. Stibbe, *John's Gospel* (London: Routledge, 1994), 41.

and perfectly human, He was able to live a sinless life to perfectly fulfill all of God's righteous demands, be a perfect representative for His people and become a perfect sacrifice for the atonement for sins.

The work assignment, therefore, that Jesus embraced led to His death. This death, according to the Gospels, was predicted by Jesus well before it had occurred:

- “From that time on Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life.” (Matt. 16:21)¹¹⁶
- “He said to them, ‘The Son of Man is going to be betrayed into the hands of men. They will kill him, and after three days he will rise.’ (Mark 9:31)¹¹⁷

As the days approached, He reminded His disciples, “As you know, the Passover is two days away – and the Son of Man will be handed over to be crucified.” (Matt. 26:2)

We learn in the Gospels that just as He predicted, Jesus was seized and brought before the civil and religious authorities and killed upon a Cross. As Gordon explains,

Dying, it must be emphasized is part of the work-plan, as Jesus explains...each of the gospel writers is quite clear on this point.¹¹⁸

As previously noted, His death was not a furtive attempt at fame or a tragic waste of the life of an inspirational figure, but rather, as Jesus explained, He shed his blood “for the forgiveness of sins” (Matt. 26:28).

We learn too that His death was not the end. The Father raised up Christ and He ascended into Heaven (John 20:1ff). He died a humbled servant, but we learn that He was lifted up as Lord and King. As the angel promised Mary,

¹¹⁶ *Cf.*, Mark 8:31, Luke 9:22.

¹¹⁷ *Cf.*, Matt. 16:2; 17:9, 17:23, 20:19

¹¹⁸ Gordon, 47. *Cf.*, John 3:13-15 and 8:28-29.

The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; his kingdom will have no end. (Luke 1:32-33)

Work that Demands a Response

As Jesus travelled throughout Galilee, he taught a message of salvation that was about Himself and His work but also included a human response:

- “The Kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!” (Mark 1:15)
- “Then they asked him, ‘What must we do to do the works God requires? Jesus answered, ‘The work of God is this: to believe in the one he has sent.’” (John 6:28-29)

Thus the response that was called for in the Gospel message was repentance and faith. This belief, however, is not something that an individual can produce on their own strength, rather it comes from God, via regeneration by the Holy Spirit.¹¹⁹ As Jesus explained, “No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws them” (John 6:44).

The results of belief in the Son are also described in the Gospels:

- “Whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.” (John 3:16)
- “Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God’s one and only Son.” (John 3:18)
- “Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God’s wrath remains on him.” (John 3:36)

Thus, the promise to those who respond to Christ’s Gospel with faith and repentance is eternal life. As Jesus explained, “I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full” (John 10:10; *C.f.*, John 20:31). Stibbe writes, then, that if the central plot (or object) of Jesus’ work is John 3:16 then,

¹¹⁹ *C.f.*, John 3:3, 3:5, 3:8; 6:37, 6:44, 6:65

we can be more specific about the *ergon* which the Father gives to Jesus. The ergon is to give *zoe*, ‘life’, to the children of God.¹²⁰

Critical Assessment of the Work of Christ

Although, seemingly straight-forward from the Gospel accounts, the work of Christ is hotly debated among scholars. Many liberal scholars deny that Jesus was even “self-aware” of His Messianic vocation. Those holding this position doubt that Christ knew He was to suffer and die or even if He wanted people to believe in Himself. Marcus Borg, for example, states, “I am sufficiently doubtful that we can trace a messianic self-awareness back to Jesus so that I do not use the term messiah...and I do not think he saw his death as central to a messianic vocation or as in some sense the purpose of his life.”¹²¹ Similarly Rudolf Bultmann writes,

The common opinion is that this belief of the earliest Church rests upon the self-consciousness of Jesus; i.e. that he actually did consider himself to be the Messiah, or the Son of Man. But this opinion is burdened with serious difficulties. It does agree with the evangelists’ point of view, but the question is whether they themselves have not superimposed upon the traditional material their own belief in the messiahship of Jesus.¹²²

He explains that events such as Peter’s confession, the Transfiguration and other events described in the Gospels could simply be “an Easter-story projected backwards.”¹²³ Bultmann summarizes his view with these words:

I do indeed think that we can know almost nothing concerning the life and personality of Jesus, since the early Christian sources show no interest in either, are moreover fragmentary and often legendary; and other sources about Jesus do not exist.¹²⁴

¹²⁰ Stibbe, 42.

¹²¹ Marcus J. Borg and N.T. Wright, *The Meaning of Jesus: Two Visions* (New York: Harper Collins, 1999), 54.

¹²² Rudolf Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament* (New York: Scribner’s, 1951), 26.

¹²³ Ibid.

¹²⁴ Rudolf Bultmann, *Jesus and the Word* (New York: Scribner’s, 1958), 8.

Against this view, I would argue that there is sufficient evidence in the Gospels and Church History that Christ was self-aware of the suffering and death that awaited him to fulfill his divine work assignment/Messianic vocation. It is clear from biblical revelation that Christ had to die because of the existential human condition: the presence and penalty of sin (which are described thoroughly in both the OT and NT). The results of Christ's faithful service to his divine work assignment resulted in His death and the death of many of His followers – an unlikely outcome if He or His followers knew that His Messianic vocation was false.

At the heart of these differences are differences in presuppositions – where the critical scholars argue from their worldview that the Gospels could not convey a revelation by God (because God could not 'break' laws of science and nature), my assertion is that because God is self-revelatory, the Gospels contain His revelation regarding a fully self-aware and self-conscious Messiah.

The Work of the Disciples

Just as Jesus was given a work assignment by His Father, Jesus the Son gave a work assignment to His disciples. Jesus explained to His disciples, "As the Father has sent me, I am sending you" (John 20:21).

This work assignment, we learn in the Gospels, was not easy. At times, while the disciples were with Jesus, they did not have a chance to eat or rest (Mark 6:30-32). Jesus emphasized several times the high cost and difficulty of following Him:

Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will find it. (Matt. 16:24-25; *C.f.*, Matt. 8:18-22)

As He sent out the disciples, Jesus commissioned them to do similar tasks that He had done in His work assignment:

As you go, proclaim this message: ‘The kingdom of heaven has come near.’ Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse those who have leprosy, drive out demons. Freely you have received; freely give. (Matt. 10:7-8; *C.f.*, Luke 9:1-6)

He explained that they should not bring any money on their journey, but receive what was offered in towns or villages because “the worker is worth his keep” (Matt. 10:10). In a parallel passage in Mark, we learn that “They went out and preached that people should repent (and) they drove out many demons and anointed many sick people with oil and healed them” (Mark 6:13).

Later, in a similar manner to sending out the twelve, Jesus sent out seventy-two disciples. (Mark 6:13; *C.f.*, Luke 10:1-12)¹²⁵ making the object of the disciples’ work assignment more than a few people in Galilean villages, but work that would impact the entire world. Jesus explained to his disciples that, “the harvest is plentiful but the workers are few” therefore they should pray that “the Lord of the harvest” would “send out workers into his harvest field” (Matt. 9:37-38).

Jesus’ Parables and Teaching on Work

Another area where work plays a prominent role in the Gospels is in Jesus’ *parabolic teaching*.¹²⁶ Many of Jesus’ parables contain descriptions of labor [i.e. a wise man building a house, the kingdom of God being like renting a vineyard or a farmer sowing seeds] (Matt. 7:24; 20:1; Mark 13:24).

¹²⁵ Some manuscripts have the number at seventy. Rengstorff explains that the number “suggests the universality of the mission,” denoting “the wider claim of Jesus which, unlike the law according to Jewish tradition, will now be embraced by Gentiles.” K.H. Rengstorff, “Seven-Hepta,” *Theological Dictionary of the NT*, 1: 251.

¹²⁶ The verses where Christ made reference to work in His teaching are marked with an asterisk on pages 35-42.

The question, therefore, that is typically asked is, “What do Jesus’ parables *mean*?” Throughout Church History, Christian interpreters have noted that the parables teach about the love of God, discipleship and seeking the Kingdom of God. In modern times, however, form, textual and historical criticism have suggested many different meanings to the parables. Many critical scholars, for example, see the meaning of the parables in the *sitz im leben* of the early Church. Ladd explains that form and text critics hold that

The Gospels in their present form are not the records of a historical Jesus, nor the products of contemporary reporters who wrote down what they saw Jesus do and heard Him say. They are the product of the believing Christian church of a generation later, and they reflect the life and faith of that community rather than the actual situation of Jesus’ life. The life setting (*Sitz im Leben*) of the Gospel traditions as we have them is the Christian church of A.D. 60-90.¹²⁷

Thus, for these critical interpreters the parables were written to address needs of the Early Church, and through the analysis of the parables much can be learned about their situation.

I would argue, however, that the words of Christ presented in the Gospels are authentic and were given during His ministry. Again (as noted previously), both perspectives demonstrate our presuppositions. From my worldview, I believe that the parables clearly display the special revelation of God as taught by Jesus, whereas many modern critical scholars would argue for the impossibility of divine revelation.

From a very different interpretive perspective, in more recent years in Evangelical circles, the use of vocational language in Jesus’ parables have led many to conclude that the point of Jesus’ parabolic teaching is about *money and possessions*. Nelson Searcy writes,

Jesus was never afraid to talk about money. Besides the kingdom of God, stewardship was his favorite subject. He talked more about money and possessions than about faith and prayer combined. He spent more time dealing with denari than with heaven

¹²⁷ George Eldon Ladd, *The New Testament and Criticism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1967), 145.

or hell. In fact, 2,350 verses in the Bible talk about money and how to deal with money.¹²⁸

Marla Alupoaipei notes that several very high-profile Evangelical leaders seem to recognize this financial focus in the parables:

Scholars point out that Jesus discusses money more than heaven and hell combined, or that Jesus talked more about money than anyone else in the Bible. Financial teacher Howard Dayton, for example, has counted 2,350 verses in God's word that deal with money. Pastor Rick Warren suggests that stewardship and redemption are the two main themes which encompass the whole of Scripture from Genesis to Revelation. Author John Ortberg asks his readers to ponder why the Bible's Author and Editor would devote twice as many verses to money than to faith and prayer. Such comments remind us how much God has to say about money; they also show us how critical it is for us to pay attention to what God's word says about our possessions and pocketbooks.¹²⁹

Thus, the use of vocational language has encouraged some popular authors to conclude that "two-thirds" of the parables are about money, possessions and stewardship.

I would concede that there are clearly biblical passages where Jesus speaks to money and possessions, such as the parables of the *Rich Fool* (Luke 12:13-21) and the *Widow's Offering* (Luke 21:1-4). In addition, Jesus' teaching includes statements such as:

- "No one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money." (Luke 16:13; *C.f.*, Matt. 6:24)
- "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moths and vermin destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moths and vermin do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also." (Matt. 6:19-22)

¹²⁸ Nelson Searcy with Jennifer Dykes Henson, *The Generosity Ladder: Your Next Step to Financial Peace* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books), no page number listed (passage in the "Openhanded Living" section). *C.f.*, Rebecca Hagelin, *30 Ways in 30 Days to Save Your Family* (Washington, DC: Regnery, 2009), 274.

¹²⁹ Marla Alupoaipei, *Your Intercultural Marriage: A Guide to a Healthy, Happy Relationship* (Chicago, IL: Moody), Managing Your Finances chapter.

- “Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; life does not consist in an abundance of possessions.” (Luke 12:15; *C.f.*, Luke 6:24)

While Jesus’ parables provide important lessons regarding earthly and heavenly possessions, I would argue that the recent interpretation that the parables are mostly about money is incorrect. First, it is interesting that the word *money* in the Gospels appears only twenty-five times – thus one must wonder how the accounting is performed so that it adds up to two-thirds of Jesus’ teaching. Secondly, if these interpreters are counting *vocational language* (which is likely), I would assert that their interpretation is incorrect. Just because a parable uses vocational language, it does not follow that it is specifically related to commerce or money. For example, in teaching His disciples, Jesus asks in Luke 14:28, “Suppose one of you wants to build a tower. Won’t you first sit down and estimate the cost to see if you have enough money to complete it?” In this example, although Jesus uses the word *money*, it is clear that the parable is not *about* money. Jesus’ point here is about the high cost of discipleship. Similarly, in the parable about the woman with ten silver coins (in Luke 15:8), the parable is not *about* the ten silver coins rather it is about the unstoppable love of God for the lost.

So, one might ask, “If not to provide practical steps regarding money, possessions and stewardship, what does it *mean* that Jesus frequently used examples from work and labor in His parables?” I would argue that the frequent use of vocation and labor in Christ’s parables indicates at least three things: Jesus’ familiarity with His people and their work; Jesus’ call to serve God in work; and Jesus’ view that God is involved in all of life (i.e. the incompatibility of separating secular and sacred).

It is fascinating that Jesus (the Son of God who had been with His Father “even before the creation of the world” according to John 17:24) believed that it would be helpful

to tell parables that began with situations His followers could relate to in their working lives, instead of simply telling about the riches of heaven.

Jesus' frequent use of vocational language indicates that He intimately *knew people and what they were doing in their work*. Unlike some speakers who attempt an analogy or metaphor with no knowledge of the subject matter, it is clear from the Gospel accounts that Jesus intimately knew the vocational work that the people were doing. There is never an example in the Gospels of Jesus' "reaching for a metaphor." Instead, the parables seem to fall quickly from His lips as He explains how spiritual concepts are like that of everyday working situations: a shepherd looking for a lost sheep (Matt. 18:12), a woman mixing flour (Matt. 13:33), or a fig tree not yielding fruit (Luke 13:6-9). It is clear from His parables that Jesus knew what workers did. He was not aloof, He knew His people.

It is also clear from Jesus' teaching that *labor is not to be despised or rejected*. He does not reject the work of the shepherd, the woman mixing flour or even the tax collector. Rather He sees them being drawn into the mercy of God. Batey notes, "His call for renewal was not a call from the daily business of life, nor to an aloofness from it. Jesus' challenge was to exalt God as Father in the world of work as well as worship."¹³⁰

Lastly, it is also abundantly clear from Christ's parabolic teaching that there is a message about *God's involvement in all of life* – the parables point to the *incompatibility of separating "secular" and "sacred."* There is no Gnostic dualism in Christ's teaching that would discourage the material and exalt the so-called spiritual aspects of life. Instead the parables are about *real life*, about real work and how God can be a part of it. Karl Barth

¹³⁰ Batey, *Carpenter*, 256.

correctly notes, “The parables are pictures from life as it is, pictures that mean something. For life as it is means something.”¹³¹

In terms of the meaning (or point) of the parables specifically, John Vincent notes that Jesus’ basic purpose or point of the parables is:

[Not] instruction or apologetics or controversy, but concealed revelation about life (the kingdom), and concealed revelation about himself (Christology)... This is to say, the main aim of the parables is to describe the activity of God in Jesus, more particularly so that men may trust in it and become disciples, or else be offended at it.¹³²

Thus, the thrust of the parables are,

[To] indicate how persons engaged in ordinary secular activities have, in fact, been dealing with the ultimately significant issues – the issues of the mysteriously present kingdom, the issues tied up with Jesus as the Messiah, the issues relating to their salvation.¹³³

As Thomas Neufeld articulates, Jesus uses the parables “to pry loose people’s assumptions about (the) kingdom” by inviting them “to become the kinds of people who are ready to respond to the surprising nature of God’s reign.”¹³⁴

In referring to the shepherd looking for the lost sheep or the woman mixing flour in His parables, Jesus utilized vocation and vocational language to point His listeners to important spiritual truths about God and His coming Kingdom.

¹³¹ Karl Barth, *The Word of God and the Word of Man*, Douglas Horton, trans. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1935), 306.

¹³² John J. Vincent, *Secular Christ* (Nashville: Abington, 1968), 113.

¹³³ Ibid., 115. *C.f.*, Matt. 13:24-30, 31-32, 20:1-15, Luke 10:25-37, 18:9-14, 19:11-26.

¹³⁴ Thomas R. Yoder Neufeld, *Recovering Jesus: The Witness of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2007), 182.

CHAPTER 5: THE HISTORICAL DEBATE ON WORK IN COMPARISON WITH JESUS' TEACHING IN THE GOSPELS

Pauline View of Work and the Gospels

Following the Gospels, we learn in Acts 18:3 that the Apostle Paul was also a worker. Vocationally, he is described by the word σκηνοποιός (*skenopoios*), which is typically translated as *tentmaker*.¹ Paul's letters also make it clear that he worked in a trade (I Cor. 4:12; 9:19; II Cor. 11:7; I Thess. 2:9).

There has been much scholarly debate regarding Paul's need to work. Was he from the lower classes and thus found work a necessity (per Deissmann), or was he from society's upper-classes and worked for other reasons (per Ramsay)?² Hock argues persuasively that Paul was from the upper-class of his society and held typical Greco-Roman attitudes toward work – seeing work as something demeaning that would make him appear “slavish” (*C.f.*, I Cor. 9:19). But for Paul, as Hock notes, it was worth being humiliated for the sake of gaining additional converts to Christianity.³

Perhaps finding a model in the work that Jesus did prior to his public ministry, Paul encouraged the Christians in the Thessalonian church to “work with your hands” so that “your daily life may win the respect of outsiders and so that you will not be dependent on

¹ Hock notes that “the nature of Paul's trade is still not clear. Of the two options – weaving tentcloth from goat's hair (*cilicium*) or cutting and sewing leather to make tents – the latter is to be preferred.” (Ronald F. Hock, “Paul's Tentmaking and the Problem of his Social Class,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 97 (December, 1978): 555.

² *Ibid.*, 555ff.

³ *Ibid.*, 560.

anybody” (I Thess. 4:11-12; *C.f.*, Eph. 4:28). Similarly, in his second letter to the Thessalonians, Paul encouraged the church to “keep away from every believer who is idle and disruptive and does not live according to the teaching you received from us” (II Thess. 3:6; *C.f.*, 3:11).

One of Paul’s concerns in his letters was with the *idleness* of some in the early church. Many scholars have argued that the idleness was due to the early Christian’s involvement in religious activities (perhaps as religious professionals) or because the congregation held to a *super-realized* eschatology.¹ Interestingly, in contrast to this common assessment, Ronald Russell explains that their idleness may have been the result of client-patron relationships that were typical in the Greco-Roman world.² In the literature of the time, we learn that it was not uncommon for a client to visit the reception room in the house of his patron each morning to receive food.³ Although the reasons behind the idleness of the Early Church are debatable, Paul is clear in his instruction to work. Paul encouraged people to work, yet he also asserted that those doing ministry (like himself) had a right to be supported financially. Paul used the teaching of Jesus when he sent out the seventy (Luke 10:7) to support his argument, telling his readers that “the worker deserves his wages” (I Tim. 5:18).

Paul explained in several letters that even though he had the right to be supported financially from the church, he did not make use of this right. He wrote,

We were not idle when we were with you, nor did we eat anyone’s food without paying for it. On the contrary, we worked night and day, laboring and toiling so that we would not be a burden to any of you. We did this, not because we do not have the

¹ Lorenz Neiting, “Sermon,” *Dialog* 16 (1977): 47-48.

² Ronald Russell, “The Idle in 2 Thess 3:6-12: an Eschatological or Social Problem?”, *NTS* 34 (1988): 112-113.

³ Bruce Winter, “If a Man Does Not Wish to Work: A Cultural and Historical Setting for II Thes. 3:6-16,” *Tyndale Bulletin* 40 (Nov. 1989): 306. (*C.f.*, N. Lewis and M. Reinhold, *Roman Civilization Sourcebook II: The Empire* [New York: Harper and Row, 1966], 129-130).

right to such help, but in order to offer ourselves as a model for you to imitate. For even when we were with you, we gave you this rule: “The one who is unwilling to work shall not eat” (II Thess. 3:7-10, *C.f.*, I Cor. 9:11-12).

Paul adds that his work was done to support his call to preach the Gospel: “What then is my reward? Just this: that in preaching the gospel I may offer it free of charge, and so not make full use of my rights as a preacher of the gospel” (I Cor. 9:18).

The View of Work in the Ancient and Medieval Church

After the close of the biblical canon, vocational language was used in non-canonical sources (such as letters and histories of the early church). For example in his first and second letters, Clement of Alexandria (c. 150—ca. 215 A.D.), used vocational language to explain important theological truths:

- “The good worker receives the bread of his labor confidently, but the lazy and careless dares not look his employer in the face. It is, therefore, necessary that we should be zealous to do good, for all things come from him.”⁴
- “And you will come to the grave like ripe wheat harvested at the proper time, or like a heap on the threshing floor gathered together at the right time.”⁵

Many in the ancient and medieval periods of the church held a belief in the dichotomy between secular and sacred work activities. As Leland Ryken explains, the church maintained a “cleavage between sacred and secular work” in which “work done by members of the religious profession was ‘sacred’ with all other work bearing the stigma of being ‘secular’.”⁶

⁴ 1 Clement 34:1 in *The Apostolic Fathers*, trans. J. B. Lightfoot and J. R. Harmer (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1891; repr 1989), 46.

⁵ 1 Clement 56:14. *C.f.*, 1 Clement 24:5; 2 Clement 8:2.

⁶ Leland Ryken, “Puritan Work Ethic: The Dignity of Life’s Labors,” *Christianity Today* 23 (October 19, 1979): 15.

An example of this division can be observed in the writings of the the church historian Eusebius (c. 263—c. 339 A.D.). In his *Demonstratio Evangelica (Proof of the Gospel)*, Eusebius explained that “two ways of life were given by the law of Christ to his Church.” The first way was “above nature” and the “perfect form of the Christian life.”⁷ The second way, according to Eusebius was “more human” with “a secondary grade of piety” that allowed people “to have minds for farming, for trade, and the other more secular interests.”⁸

The church father Augustine (354—430 A.D.) similarly “argued that the members of a monastic order were free to carry out manual labor if they wished to do so, but were not obliged.”⁹

Thomas Aquinas (1225—1274 A.D.) represents a common view toward work from the medieval church. Sedgwick notes that Aquinas

followed Aristotle in maintaining that the contemplative life takes priority. He cites Luke 10:24, where Jesus praises Mary over Martha, who symbolizes the contemplative life. There are also a series of reasons why Thomas prefers the contemplative life to the active one... (including the reason that) action involves a lower form of reasoning than the intellect.¹⁰

Reformed Views of Work

Just as the Reformation brought many changes regarding theological views on justification, Scripture and ecclesiology, the Reformation also brought a significant shift in the way vocation was regarded, as is evidenced in the writings of Martin Luther, John Calvin and the Puritans.

⁷ Eusebius, 1920. *Demonstratio Evangelica*. I:8:48. Trans. W.J. Ferrar. Internet: http://www.ccel.org/ccel/pearse/morefathers/files/eusebius_de_03_book1.htm. (accessed 2/28/11)

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Peter H. Sedgwick, *The Market Economy and Christian Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 183.

¹⁰ Ibid., 182 (*C.f.*, Thomas Aquinas, 1952. *Summa Theologica* II-II q. 182 a I. Trans. Daniel J. Sullivan. Great Books of the Western World 19, Chicago: Encyclopedia Britannica).

Martin Luther

Luther's view on work can be observed throughout his many sermons and writings. Like Paul, Luther discouraged idleness and encouraged people to work, humorously writing that God, "does not want me to sit at home, to loaf, to commit matters to God, and to wait till a fried chicken flies into my mouth. That would be tempting God."¹¹

Luther's theology of work finds many parallels in the areas discussed earlier regarding the OT theology of work (and areas to be discussed later in the Gospel's theology of work). Human work, according to Luther was a means for *God's provision*, it is "God's mask behind which he hides himself and rules everything magnificently in the world."¹² Piper explains that Luther also saw work as *service to God* as man employs "his natural gifts and resources for the benefit of his fellowmen."¹³ And he saw work as *toil*, "a burden placed upon our shoulders in consequence of the Fall."¹⁴

Holding a position contrary to the Early and Medieval Church's view of dividing work into "sacred" and "secular" activities, Luther wrote forcefully about false hierarchies that were devised "in order to get to heaven" which are claimed to "gleam like precious gems."¹⁵ Luther declared that even though household tasks have "no appearance of sanctity...these very works in connection with the household are more desirable than all the works of all the monks and nuns."¹⁶ As Ryken explains, "it was Luther who more than anyone else, overthrew the notion that clergymen, monks and nuns were engaged in holier

¹¹ Martin Luther, *Exposition of Exodus 13:18*. Ed. Ewald M. Plass, *What Luther Says: An Anthology* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1959), 3: 1496.

¹² Martin Luther, *Luther's Works* Vol. XL. Ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1995), 373.

¹³ Otto A. Piper, "The Meaning of Work" *Theology Today* 14 (July 1957): 176.

¹⁴ *Ibid.* (C.f., Luther, WA IV 1ff).

¹⁵ Luther, *Luther's Works*, Vol. XLV: 578.

¹⁶ Luther, *Commentary on Genesis* 13:13.

work than housewives and shopkeepers.”¹⁷ Luther therefore was one of the first to *ascribe sanctity to labor*.

Another factor of great significance to an understanding of work is that Luther was the first to develop the understanding of work as a *calling*. Volf explains that “Luther made an important contribution in this field by overcoming the monastic reduction of vocation to a calling to a particular kind of religious life.”¹⁸ In his sermon on 1 Peter 4, Luther explained,

The apostle Peter wants to remind everyone in particular to attend to his occupation or office and, in discharging it, faithfully to do whatever is demanded of him. For, as Scripture teaches in many places, no work is nobler than obedience in the calling and work God has assigned to each one.¹⁹

Because of this calling to a specific vocation, when tempted, Christians can respond,

I am in the proper vocation and calling, and I am doing what I have been commanded to do; therefore I must be sure that the Holy Spirit is and remains in me and that my works are done in the Holy Spirit.²⁰

Confidence in one’s work is possible because the Holy Spirit enables every “real Christian vocation,”²¹ and because of God’s grace (since human works righteousness – the attempt to earn salvation through performance – is not possible.)

While Luther’s views on vocation have provided an important contribution to understanding biblical concepts of work, Piper notes that there have been some negative consequences. One problem is *workaholism*, in that Luther’s attitude of work as *service to*

¹⁷ Ryken, 15.

¹⁸ Miroslav Volf, “Human Work, Divine Spirit and New Creation: Toward a Pneumatological Understanding of Work,” *Pneuma* 9 (1987), 179. Volf notes that Luther first used the word “vocation” as a term for secular activity in *Kirchenpostille 1522*.

¹⁹ Martin Luther, *Sermon on I Peter 4:8-11*.

²⁰ Luther, *Luther’s Works*, XLV: 578.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 579.

God has, “led to an obsession with work which is quite commonly found in Germany... (that) life seemed to derive all its meaning from the fact that a person kept himself busy.”²²

Another problem has been that the concept of *vocation* (as Luther called it) was (mis)interpreted in several destructive ways by his followers. Because Luther understood vocational calling as something similar to a spiritual calling, the idea arose that a vocational calling (like one’s spiritual calling) is marked by *singleness* and *permanence*. One consequence of this view, however, was that Luther’s followers taught that because of one’s calling, a person should never change jobs. Luther’s understanding of vocational calling, as Volf explains, has been taken to mean that “to change one’s employment means to fail to remain faithful to God’s initial commandment.”²³ This is problematic, because unlike work during the Renaissance, as Volf notes, individuals in modern economies frequently can have a *synchronic plurality of jobs*.

Another negative consequence of Luther’s views was that sanctity was ascribed to *all of man’s natural activities*. Luther saw the “lifting of a single straw” as “completely divine” work.²⁴ While this view lifted vocation up from its second class status, it has unfortunately led to misuse and abuse of workers.

John Calvin

Similar to Luther, Calvin denounced idleness and encouraged people to work and like Luther, Calvin saw “man’s natural gifts corrupted by sin.”²⁵ Yet, because of God’s *common*

²² Piper, 178.

²³ Miroslav Volf, “Human Work, Divine Spirit and New Creation,” 182.

²⁴ Luther, *Works*, X, I: 317.

²⁵ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1960), 2.2.12.

grace (common in the sense of belonging equally to all humans²⁶), humans are still endowed with “admirable gifts from its Creator” and given “excellent blessings which the Divine Spirit dispenses to whom he will for the common benefit of mankind.”²⁷

Like Luther, Calvin also saw work as a calling, explaining that “God has assigned distinct duties to each in the different modes of life.”²⁸

In addition, Calvin also spoke to the sovereignty and Lordship of God in relation to vocation and labor, stating that “...in all our cares, toils, annoyances and other burdens, it will be no small alleviation to know that all these are under the superintendence of God.”²⁹

According to Bavick,

Calvin sees the whole of life steeped in the light of the divine glory. As in all nature there is no creature which does not reflect the divine perfection, so in the rich world of men there is no vocation so simple, no labor so mean, as not to be suffused with the divine splendor and subservient to the glory of God’s name.³⁰

Because all of life is ordered by God, even the worst of tasks, has “a splendor and value in the eyes of God.”³¹

Although some later writers saw in Calvinism the origins of capitalism, Calvin was clear that work (as with all of life) is to come under the Lordship of Christ and that it should, for Christians, be marked by a denial of self and promotion of the glory of God, “we are not to seek our own, but the Lord’s will, and at with a view to promote his glory.”³²

²⁶ John C. Raines, “Tools and Common Grace,” *Cross Currents* 40 (Fall, 1990): 316.

²⁷ Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.2.15. *C.f.*, 2.2.16.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 3.10.6.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 3.10.6.

³⁰ Herman Bavinck, “Calvin and Common Grace”, *Calvin and the Reformation*, Geerhardus Vos trans. (New York: Revell, 1909), 124.

³¹ Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.10.6.

³² *Ibid.*, 3.7.2.

Puritan Views

The Puritans closely followed the teaching of Luther and Calvin in their understanding of work. The emphasis for many was on industry and honorable work, and like Luther and Calvin, they rejected the division between sacred and secular work. Ryken notes that for the Puritans, vocation was an expression of one's spiritual life. He cites Richard Steele, who in his work, *The Tradesman's Calling*, encouraged Christians to spend their money "in the shop 'where you may most confidently expect the presence and blessing of God.'"³³ Like Luther and Calvin, Ryken notes, the Puritans saw work as a *calling* in order to serve others and glorify God,

Their vocation was a calling of God. Cotton Mather declared, 'Oh, let every Christian walk with God, when he works at his calling, act in his occupation with an eye to God, act as under the eye of God.' Work was an opportunity to glorify God and to serve one's neighbor.³⁴

For the Puritans, there was also an emphasis on *moderation*:

They scorned the mentality of the workaholic as much as they did sloth. Since work was to honor God rather than to make money, too much work could be as evil as too little work. Richard Steele notes that a person should not 'accumulate two or three callings merely to increase his riches.'³⁵

The Puritans, however, rejected some forms of labor if they felt it did not bring glory to God. For example, in 1625, English Puritan Alexander Leighton published *A Short Treatise Against Stage-Playes*, in which he insisted that stage-plays were "repugnant to the written Word and Will of Almighty God."³⁶ Similarly, William Prynne, in his work *Histrio-Mastix*, or 'Against Actors' in 1633, denounced plays and actors, insisting that plays were

³³ Ryken, 15.

³⁴ Ibid., 16.

³⁵ Ibid., 18.

³⁶ Quoted in Jack Lynch, *Becoming Shakespeare: The Unlikely Afterlife that Turned a Provincial Playwright into the Bard* (New York: Walker, 2007), 15-16.

“unlawfull unto Christians.”³⁷ Consequently, in 1642, with Puritans in control of the English government, a law was enacted that shut down theaters and a 1648 law ordered that all theaters be demolished and “all actors arrested and whipped.”³⁸

³⁷ Lynch, 16.

³⁸ Ibid., 17.

CHAPTER 6: THE GOSPELS IN MODERN CHRISTIAN THEOLOGIES OF WORK

In reading modern theologies of work, it is interesting to observe how different authors have found many different applications from the Gospels, such as:

1. Participating in the suffering of Christ
2. Quality in workmanship
3. Bearing fruit
4. Creativity
5. Care for the environment
6. Redefinition of worth
7. Pneumatological understanding

Participating in the Suffering of Christ

In 1981, Pope John Paul II issued the encyclical called *Laborem Exercens* which presented a theology of work from a Roman Catholic perspective. In the encyclical, work is presented as something that is meaningful to both an individual and society, “Through work man must earn his daily bread and contribute to the continual advance of science and technology and, above all, to elevating unceasingly the cultural and moral level of...society.”¹

¹ Pope John Paul II. *Laborem Exercens*, 1981. Papal Archive. The Holy See.
http://www.catholic-pages.com/documents/laborem_exercens.pdf (Accessed 2/28/11).

This view echoes the earlier Roman Catholic encyclical, *Mater et Magistra* (1961), in which Pope John XXIII affirmed that work is for the glory of God¹ and also echoes a Roman Catholic pastoral constitution called *Gaudium et Spes* (1965), which encouraged men to “work for the rightful betterment of this world.”²

While this high view of work presented by John Paul II (and other Pontiffs) is commendable, I find one troubling aspect to their documents: the equating of the *toil* of human work with the redemptive work of Christ. Citing John’s Gospel, Pope John Paul II explains, “By enduring the toil of work in union with Christ crucified for us, *man in a way collaborates with the Son of God for the redemption of humanity*” (emphasis added).³

This view is not supported in the Gospels (nor elsewhere the NT). Christ’s atoning death was a completed action that He alone performed. While Paul encouraged his readers to “join with me in my suffering” (2 Tim. 2:3) and noted that he was “suffering to the point of being chained like a criminal” (2 Tim. 2:9), the context of these passages is clearly not typical human labor but rather the results of preaching the Gospel (2 Tim. 1:8). Later in the letter when Paul explained that he is enduring “everything for the sake of the elect, that they too may obtain the salvation that is in Christ Jesus” (2 Tim. 2:10), he was clearly not referring to *his works* or efforts in bringing about salvation, but rather the work of Christ (2 Tim. 1:9). Paul is indicating that (in the words of Guthrie), he is suffering for “those who are elect but do not believe.”⁴ Paul views his trials as worthwhile in light of the salvation that

¹ Pope John XXIII. *Mater et Magistra*. 1961, section 256. Papal Archive. The Holy See. http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_xxiii/encyclicals/documents/shf_j-xxiii_enc_15051961_mater_en.html (Accessed 2/28/11).

² Pope Paul VI. *Gaudium et spes*. 1965. Papal Archive. The Holy See. http://www.vatican.net/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_cons_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html (Accessed 2/28/11).

³ Pope John Paul II, *Laborem Exercens*, 57.

⁴ Donald Guthrie, *The Pastoral Epistles*. TNTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 156.

will come to others when they hear the Good News that he will preach to them. As Phillip West correctly observes regarding the view presented in *Laborem Exercens*, “Christ’s cross ceases to be something totally unique”⁵ if toil and difficulty in human labor are equated to Christ’s suffering in redeeming His people.

Quality in Workmanship

Many have found an application regarding the *quality of work* in the Gospels. Batey notes that “The discussion of Jesus’ trade has turned frequently to the quality of his workmanship and piety has tended to provide the appraisal.”⁶

For example, Bruce Shelley explains, “Quality is a Christian concern because for the Christian the daily job is a daily offering to God. It is never a mere matter of personal choice.”⁷ He asks, “Who after all, can image Jesus turning out shoddy work?”⁸ Shelley asserts, “The drawers of the cabinets ran smoothly, the yokes were well balanced, the boxes were square, and the toys were sturdy and safe.”⁹

Although, this emphasis on quality is commendable (and necessary in the workplace) there are no details in the Gospels regarding the quality of Christ’s workmanship as a *tekton*.

⁵ Philip West, “Cruciform Labor? The Cross in Two Recent Theologies of Work” *Modern Churchman* 28, no. 4 (1986): 14.

⁶ Batey, *Carpenter*, 249.

⁷ Bruce Shelley, “Why Work?” *Christianity Today* 33 (July 14, 1989): 18.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

Bearing Fruit

Others interestingly, find in the Gospels promises of blessings/bearing fruit in one's vocation. Wilmington, for example, explains, that "we are assured of fruit" in John 15:

(1.) We are commanded and ordained to bear fruit (15:16), (2.) If we but abide in Christ, we are absolutely assured of fruit (15:4), more fruit (15:2), and much fruit (15:8), (3.) All this fruit shall remain (15:16), (4.) The process of purging is on occasion necessary to produce the desired fruit (15:2) and (5.) The Father Himself is glorified through this fruit-bearing (15:8).¹⁰

This emphasis on bearing fruit is affirmed in the Gospels. One common mistake (that will be addressed later in this thesis), however, is that some, unfortunately, equate this only to material blessings.

Creativity

Others have found in the Bible promises of being *creative* in one's work. Dorothy Sayers writes that work should "be thought of as a creative activity" because man is "made in God's image."¹¹ Similarly, Nash explains that just as God is creative, "human work is also creative."¹²

Although this emphasis on creativity is commendable (and also necessary in the workplace) there are no details in the Gospels that specifically support this aspect of work.

¹⁰ H.L. Wilmington, "The Servant of God and His Service for God" *Fundamentalist Journal* 2 (1983): 49.

¹¹ Dorothy Sayers, "Why Work" pg. 1. Internet:
<http://holytrinitygateshead.org.uk/sermons/files/2010/06/Dorothy-Sayers-Why-Work.pdf> (Accessed 2/28/11).

¹² Elizabeth J. Nash, "A New Model for a Theology of Work" *The Modern Churchman* 29 (1986): 25.
C.f., Piper, 185.

Care for the Environment

For others, an important element regarding a theology of work is the importance of responsibility toward nature and care for the earth. For example, A. C. Westermann explains:

“Alle menschliche Arbeit, die allein auf Ertrag, den Gewinn aus ist, ohne die Bewahrung und Pflege des Bodens zu berücksichtigen, widerspricht dem Auftrag Gottes.”¹³

To some, however, this focus on the environment has led to a so-called “Ecological Spirituality” with teachings such as:

- “Correct discernment requires listening, both scientific and spiritual, to the will and voice of the Spirit of the Earth.”¹⁴
- “We form a biospiritual Body with all those suffering human beings throughout the Ecosphere.”¹⁵

The Gospels, it should be noted, do not support this Ecological Spirituality and submitting to the “voice of the Spirit of the Earth.”

Redefinition of Worth

Another important application (that the Gospels do address) is in terms of personal worth. For many, the value of a person is determined by their wealth and what they do, yet Jesus taught, “Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God” (Luke 6:20).

Luther, in his *Freedom of a Christian Man* (1520), explained that personal dignity does not come from our work or our wealth but from the fact that God created men and women and Christ died and rose for them. Similarly, Elizabeth Nash argues that Jesus

¹³ A. C. Westermann, “Arbeit und Kulturleistung in der Bibel” *Concilium* 16 (1980): 45. A rough translation is: “All human endeavor that yields only profit, without adhering to the care and nurture of the earth contradicts God’s wishes.”

¹⁴ Donald St. John, “Ecological Prayer: Toward an Ecological Spirituality” *Encounter* 43 (1982): 347.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

described the “abundant life” (John 10:10), however, “This abundant life is not about materialism but about the abundance of spiritual life, the joy, the fulfillment, the development of ourselves in the fullest way as whole beings created to relate to God and to each other.¹⁶ Kikkert adds, “Faith is not a get-rich-quick road to fame and fortune, a ticket to happiness. Faith is giving up, giving over. Faith doesn’t ask ‘What’s in it for me?’” but “What’s in me for Him?”¹⁷

Pneumatological Understanding

Lastly, some have pointed to an understanding of work that is rooted in the gifts of the Holy Spirit. Volf is one proponent of this theology (also called a *pneumatological understanding* of work) and notes that ecclesial activities (like preaching) have always been understood pneumatologically, while “secular activities” have not. Volf notes that this theology of work addresses many problems with previous theologies on work (i.e the issue of multiple careers that characterize industrial and information societies) arguing,

Since one can have multiple charisms, one can be involved in a synchronic plurality of jobs without having to degrade them as sideline jobs.¹⁸

¹⁶ Nash, 26.

¹⁷ Timothy J. Kikkert, “Keeping the Best: Elusive or Illusion?” *Military Chaplain’s Review* (1990): 90.

¹⁸ Miroslav Volf, “Work and the Gifts of the Spirit,” *Christianity and Economics in the Post-Cold War Era*. Ed. Herbert Schlossberg, Vinay Samuel and Ronald J. Sider, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 39.

CHAPTER 7: GENERAL CONCLUSIONS – A THEOLOGY OF WORK AS PRESENTED IN THE GOSPELS

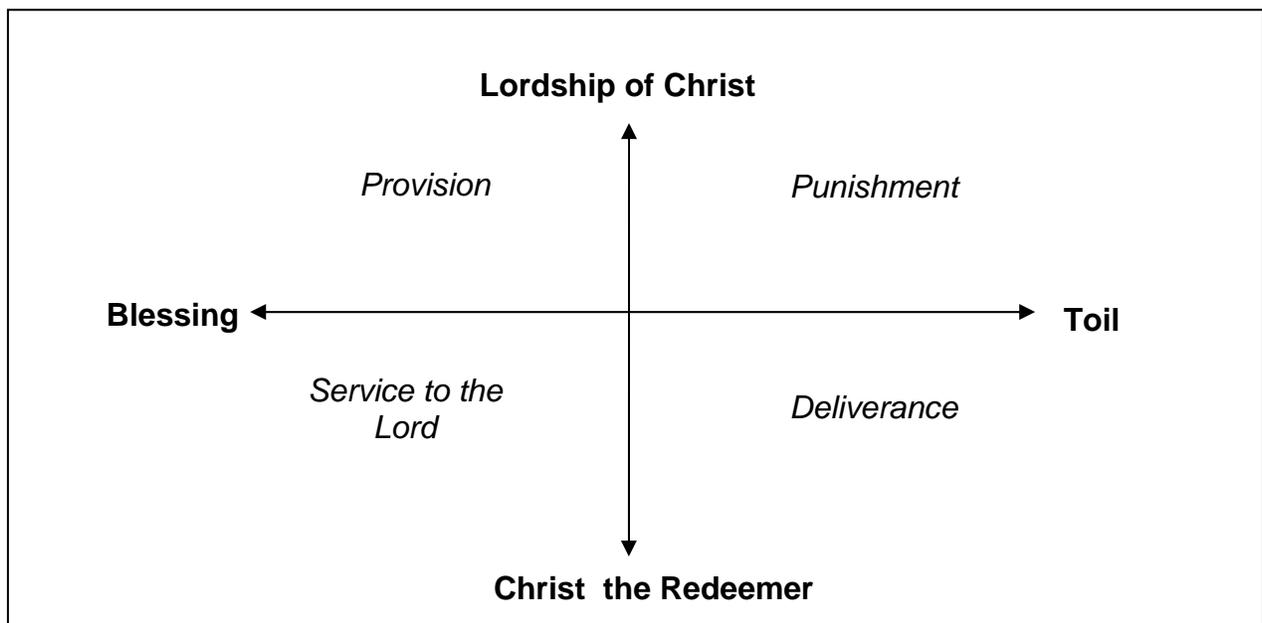
As noted previously, the OT generally contains four types of passages regarding human work, providing a helpful understanding and framework for a *Theology of Work*.

Passages in the OT describe:

- work as a gift and blessing to mankind as God’s sovereign *provision* for humanity
- work as *toil*, as God’s sovereign punishment as a result of the Fall
- God’s *deliverance* from toil
- work as *service* to God

One might ask, therefore, “*Do the Gospels present a similar theology of work compared with the Old Testament or something different?*” I would argue that the theology of work presented in the Gospels retain the same categories as the OT but also have some very important distinctions because of the NT revelation regarding Jesus Christ.

The following diagram displays this understanding of work in light of NT revelation:
Figure 2 – A Theology of Work in the Gospels



One very important element regarding work in the OT is *Lordship*. The OT emphasized that God should be served as Lord and similarly, in the Gospels, Jesus emphasized that His Father should be served as Lord, explaining, “Worship the Lord your God and serve him only” (Luke 4:8).

One very important revelation from the Gospels, however, is that *Jesus is Lord*.¹ The Gospels declare that it is Christ who should be served, and that all aspects of life come under His authority, rule and reign. Included in His all-encompassing Lordship, therefore, is work – all work comes under the Lordship of Christ and is subject to Him.

This *Lordship theology* is important not just for a theology of work, but for all Christian theology. As Jurgen Moltmann explains, for theology to be Christian, it must be cruciform:

[The] crucified Christ (is) the specific thing about Christian theology, both as regards its identity and as regards its relevance...All theological statements point to him, from the doctrine of creation to eschatology, and from the doctrine of the Trinity to the doctrine of sin.²

Moltmann continues by asserting that “all work is a *participation* in the lordship of Christ in the world.”³ In distinction from this view, I would rephrase this as: “all work is *under* the Lordship of Christ,” since Moltmann’s word *participation* seems to indicate that all humans are cognitively serving Christ in their work.

One important aspect of Christ’s Lordship is that nothing else should be worshipped. Christ is the supreme Lord and King and nothing (including human work) should supersede His Lordship in the hearts and minds of humans. In the Gospels Jesus explained this in terms

¹ *Cf.*, Matt. 12:8; 15:25; 17:4; 18:21 in which the disciples consistently called Jesus “Lord”.

² Jurgen Moltmann, *The Future of Creation*, trans. Margaret Kohl, (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979), 60.

³ *Ibid.*, 45.

of money (Matt. 6:24) and rebuked Martha when she was working instead of being with Him (Luke 10:41), likewise God rebuked Peter at the Transfiguration when he attempted to build a shelter instead of worshipping Christ (Mark 9:5). Osborn notes work's proper place as he states, "Insofar as human work is secondary to God's work, it cannot be made into a fetish or an idol. . . . In biblical terms, making secondary matters primary is idolatry, and it is strictly prohibited."⁴

Work as God's Provision

The Gospels affirm the OT view that God is our Sustainer and present work as a means for God's provision. For example, when a coin is needed for taxes, Jesus had Peter use his vocation (as a fisherman) to see God provide the coin (Matt. 17:27).

Even in the midst of sin, work continues to yield results because of God's goodness and blessing. Osborn observes, "our work is given by God as the gracious occasion for the realization of the human life God has created for us."⁵ West (who summarizes Barth's view of work) also makes this point: "As God is the Sustainer of creaturely existence he cares for its continuance, and human work can correspond to the divine care."⁶

Although it might be embarrassing for moderns to think that we need help, the Gospels firmly declare that we do. Jesus spoke frequently about the Lord's provision and that humans have no need to worry because He and His Father are faithful (Matt. 6:25ff.).

According to Osborn,

Jesus' point (in Matthew 6) is not that we are not to toil, spin, or gather into barns, but that we are not to do so anxiously, as if there were no heavenly parent working for us,

⁴ Osborn, 31.

⁵ Ibid., 30.

⁶ Philip West, "Karl Barth's Theology of Work", 13. *C.f.*, Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, III:516.

to give us life.⁷

Thus, as God's children, we can look to God's provision in our work.

Toil as the Result of Sin

The Gospels also affirm the OT view that work is a reflection of the fall. Just as the OT described sinful behaviors surrounding work, so do the Gospels – for example in their descriptions of religious leaders, the Gospels explain that the scribes and Chief Priests sought to kill Christ after He made messianic claims. Similarly, Judas Iscariot made money by betraying Christ (Matt. 26:14ff).

The Gospels describe several implications to human sinfulness in relation to work, including anxiety, fear and unrealized Kingdom expectations.

As noted, Jesus spoke to the fact that many people encounter feelings of anxiety and fear (Matt. 6:25). Osborn explains that this happens when we live and work in denial of God. He clarifies, “when sin denies God, our work becomes burdened with the responsibility of which God alone is capable.... (it is) not free and hopeful work, but anxious and burdensome labor.”⁸

In addition, because of the current condition of sin (and because of God's sovereign will), God's Kingdom is not fully realized on earth. Jesus taught His disciples to pray: “your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in Heaven” (Matt 6:10). Althaus observes, “To be a Christian is both to have and at the same time not to have, to be and at the same

⁷ Osborn, 30.

⁸ Ibid., 40.

time not yet to be.”⁹ Thus, we are living and working in an interim period, before a final fullness and realization of God’s Kingdom. As Robert Hovda notes,

The groaning and travail that is the tension between the vision of God’s realm and the status quo in which we live is the Christian life, the site of worship, the arena of work. To be part of a world still in process and in whose transformation we have a role to play – this is our covenant call. Not to worry about tomorrow. Today is where we are. And even though we cannot wait to live and act until the ultimate consensus, its process guides our baby steps, and our day-to-day decisions are provisional, imperfect, worshipful, with all the modesty that becomes the faith community in general and its leaders in particular.¹⁰

Thus, because of sin our work will be marked with the difficulty of living *between two kingdoms*.

Redemption

As noted earlier, some passages in the OT refer in vague terms to God’s *deliverance* from toil. In the Gospels, however, we learn specifically that it is Christ who will redeem His people.

Although it might not be obvious, one important element to redemption is that there must be something to redeem. Volf observes that this fact is an important element to one’s view of work (and a theology of work). At the core are eschatological assumptions (i.e. Does one see a *continuity or discontinuity* between the present age and the future age?) Volf explains,

The ultimate significance of human work depends on the answer to this question. If the world will be annihilated and a new one create *ex nihilo* then our mundane work has only earthly significance for the well-being of the worker... (thus) human work is

⁹ Paul Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1966), 404.

¹⁰ Robert W. Hovda, “Amen Corner: A Labor Day Reflection on Work and Worship”, *Worship* 61, (Sept. 1987): 457.

devoid of ultimate significance (except in the sense of being a school for the purification of the soul in preparation for heavenly bliss.)¹¹

On the other hand, Volf notes, if one believes that the world will be transformed and not destroyed, then “human work is of eternal significance” as “nothing is wasted” and human work “will be cleansed from impurity, perfected and transfigured to become part of God’s new creation.”¹²

Jesus’ prayer for the coming kingdom (Matt. 6:10, 33; Luke 11:2) and the promise of inheriting “the earth” (Matt. 5:5), according to Volf,

“is a prayer for God’s rule over all the earth and seeking the kingdom...desiring the final coming of his rule on earth...the ‘earth’ mentioned in the promise of inheriting the earth given to the meek, can only refer to the earthly locale of God’s kingdom. In the eschaton, the resurrected people of God will inhabit the renewed earth.”¹³

Service to the Lord

Lastly, like the OT, the Gospels affirm the view that work is service to God. Luke, for example, explains that Jesus and the disciples were financially assisted by women “who were helping to support them out of their own means” (Luke 8:3). These women, who apparently were wealthy were serving Christ and the disciples with their finances. Christ also affirmed this view throughout His teaching, and used vocational language in encouraging His followers to pray to “the Lord of the harvest” to “send out workers into his harvest field” (Matt. 9:37-38).

¹¹ Miroslav Volf, “Human Work, Divine Spirit and New Creation: Toward a Pneumatological Understanding of Work,” *Pneuma* 9 (1987), 175.

¹² *Ibid.*, 176. *C.f.*, F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle of Paul to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1963), 170.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 175-176.

Shoemaker writes, “As Christians, we are not called to leave behind us the body, money, work, amusements, statecraft: we are called upon to redeem these things by using them for God.”¹⁴

Conclusion

Although many scholars have asserted that little can be learned about work and vocation in the Gospels¹⁵, as evidenced by this thesis there are many elements regarding the work of Christ and of humans that are described in the Gospels – important topics that call for further reflection and even deeper examination.

Soli Dei Gloria

¹⁴ Samuel A. Shoemaker, “Working for Christ on the Job” *Christianity Today* 1 (June 10, 1957): 14.

¹⁵ See specifically page 2 and 3 of this thesis.

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