Dialogue II

Image-bearing Apprentices of a Working God? A Response to Mark D. Ward's "Toward a Biblical Understanding of the Work Ethic"

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For Mercy has a human heart,
Pity, a human face,
And Love, the human form divine,
And Peace, the human dress.
—*William Blake, "The Divine Image"*

Even when we paint a picture of God with our favorite colors, "Mercy, Pity, Peace, and Love," we must beware of casting God in our image. It is risky to speculate about the nature of God on the basis of what we presume about human nature. Fortunately, we have Scripture to guide our thinking about God and humans. Yet Scripture can be remarkably difficult to interpret, as millennia of Judeo-Christian theological debate have demonstrated.

In "Toward a Biblical Understanding of the Work Ethic," Mark Ward claims that "The Bible describes work as central to human beings" (Ward 7). This centrality is based on the combination of 1) Genesis 1:26 ("Then God said, 'Let us make man in our image, in our likeness.'") and 2) God's activity in the creation story. That is, because God worked to create the world and we were created in God's image, it follows that we were created to work:

Genesis 1 indicates that work was part of God's divine intent for his image-bearers. Just as God worked in the act of creation and continues to work in sustaining his creation, so human beings work by exercising dominion over the creation (Ward 7).

Ward is not alone in this interpretation. In *Work and Leisure in Christian Perspective*, Leland Ryken presents a similar view: "Made in the image of a God who himself works, people were created to work" (Ryken 224). Ryken and Ward also share an explanation of why humans sometimes find work so unpleasant: sin and the Fall. Ward notes, "Our current experience of work does reflect the consequences of Adam and Eve's sin" (Ward 7). In order to construct a biblically-based work ethic, we must remove the distortions of sin to behold work in its Edenic, pristine form.

Ward's argument for the centrality of work fails to mention the rich history of Christian interpretation of "the image of God." Following Augustine, Thomas Aquinas equates God's image with rationality and writes, "God made man after his own image insofar as he gave him an intelligent mind" (*Summa Theologiae* I.93.2). John Calvin understands the image of God as "light of intellect, rectitude of heart, and the soundness of every part" (*Institutes of the Christian Religion* I.xv.4). Karl Barth interprets the image of God as "existence in confrontation," and he links the relatedness of God to humans with the relatedness of humans to each other (*Church Dogmatics* III.1, p. 195). Clearly, the meaning of "God's image" is far from transparent.

Ward's view of the image of God connects to a perennial interpretation when Ward equates work with "exercising dominion over creation" (Ward 7). Yet dominion, rather than describing a productive occupation, describes a power relationship—which frequently becomes a relationship of dominance, coercion, and oppression. Daniel Migliore writes:

This interpretation of the image of God is often associated with a worldview in which all relationships are construed in hierarchical patterns: God rules over the world, the soul controls the body, men are the masters of women, and humanity dominates the other creatures (Migliore 121-122).

In the *Institutes*, Calvin sharply disagrees with the dominion interpretation of the image of God. Calvin writes, "Nor is there probability in the opinion of those who place likeness of God in the dominion

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bestowed upon man, as if he only resembled God in this, that he is appointed lord and master of all things. The likeness must be within, in himself" (I.xv.4).

Let us consider Ward's argument on its own merits. To be convincing, he must show that 1) "working" is the best way to describe what God does in creation, and that 2) when God spoke of creating humans in His image, He intended for them to reflect this "working" aspect of His own being.

Ward does not explain why "work" is the best classification for what God does. While some of the words Genesis uses to describe what God does are active ("He separated... ," "God made..."), for the most part God simply speaks ("'Let there be light,'" "'Let there be an expanse between the waters,'" "God called the dry ground 'land,'" etc.). Why not describe what God does primarily as "speaking" (or maybe even as "singing")? The "speaking" interpretation is more consistent with the introduction to the Gospel of John (1:1-3):

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made.

Why not characterize what God does in Genesis 1-3 as "play," the result of God's overabundance of energy? Another alternative is simply to classify what God has done as "creation." This seems the most simple and straightforward description of God's activity.

If we define work as effort expended for material benefit, then a God who neither sweats nor needs a paycheck does not work. Ward would remind us that when we speak of exertion and need for bread, we are talking about work *after the Fall*. Both of these are part of God's curse. But if "fallen" work is all we know, how can we say that what God did at creation was "work"? That is, on what grounds can we use this word for both humans and for God? When Ward speaks of God as "working," what he really means is simply that God "does something." It is a stretch to link this "doing something" with our notion of work.

Even if we were to characterize God's creation as "work," it does not follow that humans bear the image of God primarily through working. We should not presume to know God's will well enough to read between the lines of the Genesis account and call work the "creation-ordained purpose for humans." The work interpretation does not make sense of Genesis 1:27:

So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.

In closing, I turn to the function of Ward's biblically-based work ethic as a thoroughly middle-class ideology. If Ward's interpretation of the image of God is correct, what are some implications? Social welfare programs, for instance, might be written off as promoting laziness and defying God. Ward's interpretation may be good news for those who have well-paying, fulfilling jobs with opportunities for advancement—they need only to continue pursuing their careers and glorifying God. But for those of the lower classes who are locked into low-paying, degrading work, the "biblically-based work ethic" might amount to a message of "stop complaining, get back to work, and praise God." I do not mean to impute any of these views to Mark Ward, but I think they are consistent with his work ethic.

In "Toward a Biblical Understanding of the Work Ethic," Ward raises many questions that are interesting and worthy of debate. Is the Protestant work ethic really declining? How would we support this claim one way or another? How do we offer our work as "a gift to God" (Ward 13)? One of the most significant and controversial issues Ward raises is how to interpret "the image of God." Like William Blake, we must persistently ask what it means to pray "to the human form divine."

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