

Dialogue II

Serving a Working God Through Our Work A Response to Robert Huie's "Image-bearing Apprentices of a Working God?"

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Robert Huie has raised important questions in his response to my fall 1996 article in the *Journal of Biblical Integration in Business*. For if we are to live lives of faithful obedience to Christ, we must understand who God is and who we are. My purpose in writing the article "Toward a Biblical Understanding of the Work Ethic" was not to describe all of who God is and all of who we are as His creatures, but rather to describe one aspect of God's divinity and our humanity: work. It is my conviction that popular notions of work, such as the Protestant work ethic, can be useful to Christians if they are used with discernment.

My understanding of work is tied to a long tradition of biblical scholarship. I believe that I can learn from the discernment of fellow Christians, both past and present. In some cases, however, that tradition may prevent some

from seeing the direct connection of this scholarship to the Bible. I hope to clarify in this response how I connect the Bible to the idea that work is one important way (but not the only way) we reflect the image of our Creator who works.

As Robert Huie states, if image-bearing includes the aspect of working, two conditions must be met: "working" must be an appropriate way to describe what God does in creation and we must be able to demonstrate that God intends for humans to reflect this "working" aspect of His own being. Scripture addresses both of these conditions.

First, is "working" the best way to describe what God does in creation? The Bible uses "work" (*m@la`kah* in Hebrew) to describe God's creation activity. Genesis 2:2-3 states, "By the seventh day God had finished the work (*m@la`kah*) he had been doing; so on the seventh day he

rested from all his work (*m@la`kah*). And God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it he rested from all the work (*m@la`kah*) of creation that he had done." This same Hebrew word is used in Psalm 73:28 to describe God's continuing care for his creation.

The fact that God's activity is described as work is significant. In *Why Work?*

Careers and Employment in Biblical Perspective, John Bernbaum and Simon Steer note, "It is striking that no other religion holds to a belief in a God who works" (p. 3). Why not, as Huie suggests, characterize what God does in the first chapters of Genesis as play instead of work? For me, the most compelling evidence is that the Bible itself in Genesis 1:3 chooses to describe God's activity as work.

Second, does God intend for us to reflect the working aspect of his being? The connection between God's work and our work is also addressed in the Bible: We work and rest because God worked and rested. This connection can be seen in the fourth commandment: "Six days you shall labor and do all your

work (*m@la`kah*). But the seventh day is the Sabbath to the Lord your God. On it you shall not do any work (*m@la`kah*) ...For in six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but he rested on the seventh day. Therefore the Lord blessed the

Sabbath day and made it holy" (Exodus 20:9-11, NIV). The

word used to describe human work in Exodus 20:9 is the same Hebrew word used in Genesis 2 to describe God's work. Other biblical passages make the connection between God's work and our work. Psalm 104, in the midst of describing a working God, makes reference to human work (verse 23). On what grounds can we use the word "work" to describe the activity both of humans and of God? On the grounds that the Bible uses the same word to describe the work of God and the work of humans.

Part of the reason Huie views the role of work differently is that he holds to a narrow definition of work. For Huie, work is "effort expended for material benefit." As I described in the article "Toward a Biblical Understanding

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of the Work Ethic,” I would define work more broadly as “service to God and others.” For example, an adult child caring for an elderly parent is engaging in work, although no material benefit may be expected or result from the effort. It is liberating to realize that while our work may benefit us personally, it is also a means for us to encounter and serve God as we serve others.

In retrospect, I should have made the connection between dominion and service more evident. It is true that dominion can frequently become a relationship of coercion and oppression. The concept of exercising dominion can be an uncomfortable one for contemporary Christians, however, that does not negate the fact that God has instructed humans in Genesis 1:26 and 28 to have dominion over the creation. Although Genesis 1:28, when considered in isolation, may be construed as a forceful, self-centered mastery of creation, the meaning of exercising dominion takes on a deeper dimension in Genesis 2. There God places Adam in the garden and charges him with the responsibility to cultivate and keep it. This could be translated from the Hebrew as “to serve and to keep, watch, or

preserve.” Therefore, fulfilling God’s command to exercise dominion implies a stewardship that is revealed in a humble service of the creation. In our fallen state, we all fail to live up to God’s intention in exercising dominion. We often use the power inherent in exercising dominion to serve ourselves at the exclusion of others. Huie is right to note that there are Christian traditions that use the concept of dominion to construe all relationships in hierarchical patterns. This should not cause us to avoid exercising dominion but rather to seek, through the transforming power of Jesus Christ, to act in God-honoring ways as we fulfill the mandate of Genesis 1:28.

Finally, what are the implications for social welfare programs of placing a high value on work? I agree with Huie that too often the Christian community adopts a simplistic understanding of work. In fact, part of the impetus for writing this article was to point out the inconsistencies between a biblical understanding of work and the understanding of work often attributed to (and in some cases held by) Christians. Regardless of the ever-present potential for misinterpretation, work should be

a central component in the development of social welfare programs.

My highest social welfare priority would be to place people in positions where they can serve (i.e., be productive). Therefore, I believe the initial effort of our welfare system should be to help individuals make the transition into the work force. Such an approach is consistent with God’s provisions in the Old Testament for structural mechanisms to return the poor to a position of productivity (e.g., the Jubilee principle, the sabbatical year, and the leaving of a portion of the crops in the field so that the poor could gather food). In a perfect world, we could stop at this point, having fulfilled our responsibilities. But in a sinful world, we know that the transition into the workforce may not always be possible; some individuals will be unable to work, some are unable to find work that will allow them to meet their financial needs, and some are unwilling to work. So we need a secondary (i.e., non-work based) system of social welfare programs to provide for the needs of these individuals, similar to God’s requirement that the Israelites provide for the immediate needs of the poor they

encounter. I would hope that placing a high value on work does not require me to take a simplistic approach to social welfare programs. But I do believe that our welfare program would greatly benefit from a more Christ-like view of the poor as image-bearers of God, capable and desirous of serving others.

Our God is a working God. As his image-bearers, our approach to work—in other words, our approach to serving God and others—should be one important way we fulfill the mandate of Genesis 1:28. In doing so, I believe we will also be honoring the Great Commission of Matthew 28:20 by witnessing to our relationship with God through a life of faithful obedience.

REFERENCES

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