

Is gospel work more
sacred than secular
work?



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Introduction

The sense of separation between 'sacred' and 'secular' jobs has grown to a tipping point where it is almost falling apart. As a result, many people are yearning to rediscover the spiritual roots of their existence as well as their God given purpose in life. There are various writers from different contexts since the early church that have covered the issue of 'sacred' and 'secular' jobs as well as the issue of integrating work and faith. The idea of calling and occupation continue to be very open to misinterpretation by both religious and non-religious scholars.

The book of Genesis, begins talking about work as soon as it begins talking about anything and it makes it very clear that in the beginning of time there was work. It also makes it very clear that God worked, creating, sustaining and redeeming things and people, and that He determined that mankind would work as part of fellowship with Him. Hence, it is perfectly clear that God's good plan always included human beings working, yet in our world today, majority of the Christians hold a particular view of work either as a curse or a part of the curse of living in a fallen world. Some others have gone to the extent of creating false distinctions between what they recognize as sacred work and secular work that does not serve God's work. This has left many Christians struggling with the perception that career ministry jobs are more spiritual than other jobs.

Despite the fact that work is part of what we are called to do in fellowship with God, this view of those in full time ministry work versus those who work in secular jobs has created a definite division in the church. This has been

exacerbated by how little the church and its leaders have focused on the biblical view of work or neglected it in totality. As a result, the workplace where many Christians spend about 30-50% of their life is left without the much-needed Christian understanding of mission and purpose in the world. Jerram Barrs, a professor of Christianity and Contemporary Culture and Resident Scholar of the Francis Schaeffer institute at Covenant Theological Seminary wrote “ we think that only evangelism, only preaching the Gospel, only teaching the Word is of real importance to the Kingdom of God- everything else is secondary but that simply is not Biblical. He has equally called people to be in other work and to honor Him, whatever their occupation”. The division and confusion between sacred and secular work has led to a lot of debates by Christian scholars and evangelical circles in recent years. According to Keller, the number of books, scholarly projects, academic programs, and online discussions on this subject has grown exponentially in the past two decades (Keller, 2012).

Although God calls us to honor Him in our current work and to do so with all our hearts because he has put us in the very positions for a reason, it is the very division between ‘ sacred’ and ‘ secular’ jobs that has inspired me to further examine it in this paper.

The history of faith and work

The Bible in Genesis describes God’s creation of the world as work (Keller 2012) that also includes the creation of humanity. It clearly underscores that human beings were created to work, and that work is an indispensable part of our image bearing nature. It further elaborates that human beings as

image bearers of God, were commissioned to carry on God's work, to be sub-creators, to rule, to work, and to worship, and continue with the creative process of making the earth suitable for human flourishing. Therefore, we clearly see that from the beginning, "work was not a necessary evil that came into picture later, or something human beings were created to do but that was beneath the great God himself" (Keller 2012).

Historical studies from the first century, through the Middle Ages and the Protestant Reformation, until the twentieth century on the doctrine of work and the 'sacred/secular' divide show different levels of understandings as well as interpretations. This could have been as a result of the changing economic circumstances during the periods that the writers lived that demanded different responses. Contributions from some writers in the recent years highlights the difficulty of consistently maintaining a broad view of work and the link between faith and work. Keller states that many scholars continue to seek older sources of information for the integration of faith and work. He further adds that "the sixteenth-century Protestant Reformers, particularly Martin Luther and John Calvin, argued that all work, even so-called secular work, was a much calling from God as the ministry of the monk or priest (Keller 2012).

In human history, most cultures had religious doctrines and rites that included individuals that acted as mediators in some way between the deity and other human beings. These mediators were perceived to be holy and purified from the wicked world. Therefore, these backgrounds from the various cultures on 'sacred' and 'secular' occupations found its way into the church through the early Christians. It is through this that those people who

<https://assignbuster.com/is-gospel-work-more-sacred-than-secular-work/>

made their living through preaching the gospel were seen as having more spiritual jobs. The same people who act as priests in the modern-day Christianity replaced the role of the traditional mediators between God and men. This view of sacred and secular occupations continued to remain a contentious issue particularly between the conservative evangelicals and those Christians who were more positive towards market capitalism. The contention eventually gave birth to the rise of faith and work movements. According to Miller, the history of the modern 'faith and work' movement started to shift its focus from evangelism and foreign missions to more social concerns in the early twentieth century (Miller, 2007). The leaders of this movements brought the needed correction to the erroneous understanding arguing that in the New Testament, God draws no sacred or secular work distinctions within the church.

The extent of the 'sacred/secular' division

Despite the work done by the modern-day faith and work movements, millions of Christians continue to struggle with finding spiritual meaning in their work. There continues to be a huge divide and understanding between jobs that are more sacred and other jobs. Categorization of jobs between "sacred" and "secular" continue to be deeply engraved in the church. We rarely hear an invitation in church for instance for career individuals to come forward and "surrender to their call" be it nursing, banking, engineering or even a service for 'commissioning' a member of the congregation who has launched a new company or business. What we commonly witness is the 'commissioning' of pastors and evangelists. This incompleteness has largely contributed to the extent of the divide between the "called" and the "

<https://assignbuster.com/is-gospel-work-more-sacred-than-secular-work/>

uncalled” occupations as well as the church to become largely estranged from the working-class people. The working class do not consider working hard to have any relationship with their religious beliefs anymore and have idolized work. They expect their talents and hard work to be rewarded by material gains and career advancement rather than the Biblical teaching of heavenly rewards as stated in 1 Corinthians 3: 8 “ He who plants and he who waters are one in purpose and each will be rewarded according to his own labor” and Revelations 22: 12 “ Look, I am coming soon! My reward is with me, and I will give to each person according to what they have done”.

On another end, some Christians still argue that the Bible does speak of those that are called out of the world or “ sanctified” (Romans 1: 7 “ To all in Rome who are loved by God and called to be his holy people.....”) for God to be the salt and light of the world (Mathew 5: 13-16) whereas some point out that the same Bible does not distinguish between secular and sacred because all creation is God’s and that one day, all creation will be restored (Isaiah 2: 2 “ In the last days the mountain of the LORD’s temple will be established as the highest of the mountains; it will be exalted above the hills, and all the nations will stream to it”). In simple terms, the division can be explained as the view of life built on a separation between the things, people and places one believes to be sacred and those believed to be worldly (secular). For instance, the view of certain positions as holy (pastor/missionary), certain positions as secular (engineering, banking, nursing), certain places as holy (church, seminaries) and other places as secular. This division has resulted to a culture where Sunday is considered as a day for “ church stuff” whereas the rest of the week belongs to the “

worldly stuff". Human beings therefore have lost the sense that one can be called even in a secular job just as were Joseph, Daniel and Nehemiah and they could be as strategic in God's plan as pastoring in a church. The effect of this according to Keller is that people perceive the only good work to be "work that helps make us money so that we can support our families and pay others to do menial work and as a result, many people take jobs that they are not suited for at all, choosing to aim for careers that do not fit their gifts but promise higher wages and prestige" (Keller 2012).

The effect of the ' sacred/secular' division

The effect of the divide has seen most believers to view their work as an unspiritual activity and not a ministry and the rise of the unspoken spiritual hierarchy that ranks jobs based on their religious appearance even though the Scriptures make it very clear that there are no jobs less spiritual than any other when done with the heart to serve God. The inherent failure of the church and its leadership to provide guidance on the issue of the divide to its congregants continue to leave many Christians with the believe that the pastor or missionary work is the most spiritual whereas the secular jobs not affiliated to church work as the least. According to Keller, "... the church at that time understood itself as the entirety of God's Kingdom on earth, and therefore only work in and for the church could qualify as God's work (Keller 2012). Some other Christians perceive work as a consequence of the fall and relate it with when God in Genesis 3 said to Adam that he will live by the sweat of his brow, battling thorns and thistles until he returns to the ground. Keller states that the story presented in the Bible is that while God Blessed work to be a glorious use of our gifts and his resources to prosper the world,

<https://assignbuster.com/is-gospel-work-more-sacred-than-secular-work/>

it is now also cursed because of mankind's fall (Keller 2012). As a result of the compartmentalization and lack of clarity on the issue of what is sacred and what is not, people have made work closely tied to their sense of self-worth that it has become a difficult subject to be objective about. Work is also profoundly frustrating, never fruitful as human beings want it, and often a complete failure. This is why so many people inhabit the extremes of idealism and cynicism- or even ricochet back and forth between those poles (Keller 2012).

As a result of the failure to have the religious guidance on the issue of "sacred" versus "secular" jobs, we are continuing to witness the consequences where ordained pastoral ministry, evangelism or missionary work continues to be elevated above other occupations, the world of the church is considered divine where as the market place perceived as secular, and faith to be considered a personal and private affair. With people idolizing jobs, we are witnessing an increase in workaholism and the devastating effects of unemployment because people view employment as necessary for one to be seen to have achieved in life as well as a source of fulfillment.

Overcoming the 'sacred/secular' division

As believers in Christ, sin makes it difficult for us to fathom our God given purpose in life. We need to shift from separating work and faith into secular and spiritual spheres to integrating our faith and work. We need to find a path that will lead us out of the "sacred/secular" divide and idolizing work into rediscovering that our primary job is the call to follow our Lord Jesus Christ and that this call embraces the whole of our lives including our

everyday work. We need to come to the realization that the Cross restored the meaning and purpose to our work lives, redeeming it into a way for us to worship God and that God's plan always included human beings working. Witherington puts it clear that God's good plan always included human beings working, or, more specifically, living in the constant cycle of work and rest (Witherington 2011). Warren echoes this idea when he writes, "work becomes worship when you dedicate it to God and perform it with an awareness of his presence" (Warren 2002).

As believers, we ought to know that the true meaning of work is captured throughout the Scriptures. That we are called to grow in virtue, and that although we receive some of these virtues as gifts, we develop other virtues by our daily choices and actions. We need to know that when we do our work very well despite the ups and downs related to the workplaces, we grow in the virtue that equips us for heaven. We need to embrace whatever jobs or positions we are in even when it is hard because God has equipped us to be in that position as is written in Exodus 36: 1 "Every skillful person in whom the Lord has put a skill and understanding to know how to perform all the work". We shouldn't look at our performances in our work as a matter of one individual being better than the other, or a certain position being better than the other but simply have the understanding that we all have received different abilities. This way, we will see the value for caring for the world and for other people as we work and in return honor God's call to work.

As believers, we ought to know that God has put us in our current jobs and positions for a reason and that He calls us to honor him wherever we are with all our heart, whether we serve in "secular" jobs or not. The workplace

<https://assignbuster.com/is-gospel-work-more-sacred-than-secular-work/>

is where people spend 30-50% of their life and hence, the workplace is the most appropriate place to do the ministry and expand the kingdom of God. As Piper puts it, " There is such a thing as being in the world but not of the world, as Jesus taught when he prayed in John 17: 15-16, " I do not ask that you take them out of the world, but that you keep them from the evil one. They are not of the world, just as I am not of the world." So Jesus' intention is that his disciples remain in the world (which is what I mean by " secular jobs"), but that they not be " of the world" (which is why I say we are in a war)" (Piper 2003). Piper further adds that " The Bible makes it plain that God's will is for his people to be scattered like salt and light among the whole range of secular vocations. Enclaves of Christians living only with Christians and working only with Christians would not accomplish God's whole purpose in the world. That does not mean Christian orders or ministries, or mission outposts are wrong. It means they are exceptional. The vast majority of Christians are meant to live in the world and work among unbelievers. This is their " office," their " calling"" (Piper 2003). Therefore, in whatever God has given us as a job, let us make God look great as is written in 1 Corinthians 7: 17 " Nevertheless, each person should live as a believer in whatever situation the Lord has assigned to them, just as God has called Them".

For us as believers, it is certain that we don't need to be in full-time ministry in order to do ministry, but we can minister in our current positions or jobs through working wholeheartedly. We know that serving our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ is not about a moment in future, but about where we are at the moment. We can worship our God through exemplifying a Christ like life. By

making sure that our words, actions and decisions are representing Christ and by striving for excellence in our work and through always demonstrating honesty and integrity, we will be ministering to our colleagues just as Martin Luther wrote “ The Christian shoemaker does his Christian duty not by putting little crosses on the shoes, but by making good shoes, because God is interested in good craftsmanship”. Warren writes that “ Another term for serving God that’s misunderstood by most people is the word *ministry*. When most people hear “ ministry”, they think of pastors, priests, and professional clergy, but God says every member of his family is a minister” (Warren 2002).

Conclusion

From the book of Genesis, it is evident that the interaction between God and the first man took place before sin entered the earth. It is also evident that God always intended for us to work and eat the fruit of our labors. From the Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard in the book of Mathew 20, we know that God is calling us to labor in His vineyard and that idleness has never been part of His will because God has enough going on to keep all of us occupied. Therefore, we have no justification to be idle and claim that there are no jobs but to make every effort and find something to do whether it is in the church, as a volunteer or in the market place.

For those of us in employment, God is calling us to take the Gospel to our colleagues whether we supervise them, are our coworkers or superiors. We know that God did not just place us in our jobs for the salary but for ministering to His flock so as to expand His Kingdom. God expects us to give

our best in everything that we do as is written in Colossians 3: 23 “ Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not human masters...” By doing this, the church will flourish and become stronger, Gods Kingdom will expand and the participants in God’s work will increase in number and impact.

Therefore, I conclude by asking that since our ‘ calling’ is ‘ ministry’, we take the necessary action and prepare ourselves to do it well through Bible studies, and undertaking training in either theology, ethics, evangelism, and apologetics. In addition, we need to be better at building and sustaining relationships, getting into small sharing/fellowship groups, as well as get accountability partners. We also need to intentionally integrate our faith and work and exemplify a Christ like life in our work life. Finally, as guided by the scriptures, we need to do everything that we do, “ whether you eat or drink whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God” Corinthians 10: 31. AMEN.

Recommendations

As I researched through the issues raised above, I have encountered some gaps and areas that require further studies. More work needs to be done in relation to establishing and understanding the common manifestations of integrating faith and work so as to effectively support and promote the integration of faith in our work. On the other hand, there is also need to understand to what extend are Christians adopting and emphasizing the facets of integrating faith and work. Finally, there will be need to further do some work to establish the impact or implications of integrating faith and work to both the Christian workers and their colleagues.

REFERENCES

- Keller, Tim. *Every Good Endeavor: Connecting Your Work to God's Work*. New York: Penguin, 2012
- Miller, W. David. *God at Work: The History and the Promise of the Faith at Work Movement*. Oxford University Press, 2007.
- Piper, John. *Don't Waste Your Life*. Crossway Books, 2003
- Warren, Rick. *The Purpose Driven Life: What on Earth Am I Here For?* . Zondervan, 2002.
- Witherington, Ben. *Work: A Kingdom Perspective on Labor*. Eerdmans, 2011