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# Off to Work? Don't Forget Your Doctrine

*Whenever we labour, we are always serving  
the Lord, as part of our life-encompassing  
worship of him*

When I head off to work at the seminary I should have my briefcase in one hand and my lunch bag in the other. However, a couple of times I've arrived at the seminary only to realize that I forgot my lunch. Note to self: before you go to work, remember to take your lunch along.

Oh, and remember to take your doctrine along, too. Whether you work at home or away from home, whether you take a lunch or buy one, you simply must take your doctrine to work. "Doctrine?" you ask, "You mean, the Bible's teachings about God, salvation, and eternal life? Those teachings which are summarized in the confessions?" Yes, those doctrines. Pack your lunch bag with a tasty sandwich. But pack your heart with some solid doctrine. It will make your day that much more delightful.

In order to explore this idea in detail, let's follow the traditional six-fold division of dogmatic studies. The major topics are the doctrines of God, man, Christ, salvation, church, and the last things. Or if you prefer the more technical terms: theology, anthropology, Christology, soteriology, ecclesiology, and eschatology. There's a lot to cover, so please bear with my brevity.

## God

From the opening chapters of Scripture we learn that God worked. "By the seventh day God had finished the work he had been doing" (Gen 2:2). The word used for "work" in that verse includes hands-on labour. It's also used for building a tabernacle (Exod 35:35) and plowing fields (Prov 24:27). And God continues to work. In fact, Jesus Christ said, "My Father is always at his

work to this very day, and I, too, am working" (John 5:17). Now, since it is not below the Creator's divine dignity to work, it stands to reason that we, mere creatures of the dust (Gen 2:7), should be willing to put in a hard day's work, too.

God also rejoices in his work. In the beginning, he surveyed his work of creation and saw that it was very good (Gen 1:31). Yet, even after the fall into sin, the Lord still rejoices in his works (Ps 104:31). Now, it's one thing to joyfully take care of a groaning creation, it is quite another to save stubborn, foolish sinners. Surely, the latter is more arduous than the former. Yet, the Lord delights in redeeming his chosen Zion, even though that same Zion does more than her fair share of ungrateful grumbling (Isa 62:5; 65:19; Jer 32:41; Zeph 3:17). So, since the Almighty takes delight in the none-too-easy work of redeeming us, surely we are encouraged to rejoice in our work – even when it's one of those days that is full of obstructions and frustrations.

## Man

God put Adam, and later Eve, in the Garden of Eden to work (Gen 2:15). Simply put, living in Paradise was not a prelapsarian staycation for Adam and Eve. The Garden was big and beautiful, and there was plenty of work to be done, each day again. Interestingly enough, the word used for "work" in Genesis 2:15 is different than the one used earlier in the chapter to describe God's work. This time the word has a wide range of meanings which include to labour, to serve, and to worship. You can tie them all together as follows: whenever we labour, we are always serving the Lord,



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Cover photo courtesy Leanne Lodder

as part of our life-encompassing worship of him. He is the Master; we are the servants. That is simultaneously humbling and liberating. Each morning we head off to our daily duties – at home, school, or the workplace – and we do our very best. Yet at the end of the day we acknowledge that we are only the stewards and he is still the Owner of it all (Ps 24:1). Remembering that truth makes it easier to sleep at night, too (Ps 127:2b).

Not only were we created to work, but we are also commanded to work. In the fourth commandment the Lord instructs us to rest for one day but also to work for the other six. "Six days you shall labour and do all your work" (Exod 20:9). That is, after all, a divine command. Your Mom (or your wife) should not have to prod you out of bed in the morning. The Lord's fourth commandment should provide all the motivation you need.

At the same time, the overall tone of this command is tuned by the original mandate to rule over creation. As those created in God's image and likeness, we have a noble calling to fulfill each day as royal sons and daughters of our heavenly Father. The Catechism has

**What's Inside**

Our seventeenth issue of the year will be in your hands shortly before Labour Day. With that in mind, our guest editorial from Dr. Jason Van Vliet discusses work and doctrine: how our daily labour is an act of worship and thankfulness.

Part two of Dr. Cornelis Van Dam's "Prayer as an Incense Offering" focuses on the aroma of sacrifice. What does God demand of us today? What scent pleases him?

In their recent report the Committee for Bible Translation has rejected the new 2011 version of the NIV Bible. Rev. Clarence Bouwman discusses their reasons for doing so in this issue.

The Ecumena column reports on the recent March for Life held on May 10 in Ottawa. We also include Treasures New and Old, a Reader's Forum on Christian contemporary music, and a Mission News insert in Issue 17.

Laura Veenendaal

a nice way of lining this up. In Lord's Day 49, dealing with the third petition, we learn that "everyone" has "his office and calling." Next, in Lord's Day 50, dealing with the fourth petition, we learn our "care and labour" needs God's blessing. That order is significant. All our care and labour occurs under the God-given umbrella of our office and calling. So, whether your daily duties involve pouring cement or shaping the minds of young children, the task takes on more dignity if you think of it as a vocation, a calling from God, rather than just another job.

Of course, since the fall into sin, our vocations have been adversely affected by God's curse upon the ground. Whether you are a farmer or a framer, each day's labour contains more than enough thorns, thistles, and sweaty brows (Gen 3:17-19). However, let's be careful: the result of the fall does not define the nature of work. Work, in and of itself, is not equal parts perspiration and aggravation. Work itself is a joyful blessing. The burdensome part of work only came because we sinned, not because of what God created. So, the next time things go sideways at work, be sure to distinguish in your mind between work as created and working under the curse.

## Christ

There is an intriguing verse at the very end of 1 Corinthians 15. The chapter is about death and the resurrection of the body. Part of it (vv. 51-57) is often read at the graveside. Yet surprisingly it ends on the topic of work. The relevant words are: "Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labour in the Lord is not in vain" (v. 58). What do death and daily labours have in common? In Ecclesiastes, the Preacher had no difficulty making the connection. He says that it is precisely death which seems to make our work so meaningless. At a certain point, he even hated the things for which he worked so hard because he realized that at his death he had to leave all his wealth to someone else, who may well foolishly squander it all (Eccl 2:17-18).

The last verse of 1 Corinthians 15 is the Christ-centred answer to the Preacher's exasperation. Christ, who arose from the death, took the sting out of death (v. 55) and simultaneously put the purpose back into work. Life's labours do not just tragically grind to a meaningless halt at the grave. Far from it! As surely as there will be a resurrection of the body one day, so certainly there is purpose and meaning to our daily duties today.

Above all, this is true because the work we do is now "the work of the Lord" (1 Cor 15:58). Whatever the name of our boss, whatever the title of our position, this doctrine applies to us all, both younger and older. So, "Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men" (Col 3:23).

## Salvation

It is clear that our Saviour Jesus Christ worked hard for our salvation. We may have to wipe the sweat from our brow from time to time. But that's nothing compared to what Christ did for us in the Garden of Gethsemane. "And being in anguish, he prayed more earnestly, and his sweat was like drops of blood falling to the ground" (Luke 22:44). And it only became worse on the cross.

The work that we do each day is part of our thankfulness for the salvation work that Christ did for us. Again, the Catechism has a nice way of lining this up. Daily work is explicitly mentioned three times in the Catechism: Lord's Day 42 ("work faithfully"), Lord's Day 49 ("carry out the duties of his office and calling"), and Lord's Day 50 ("our care and labour"). Notice which section all three are in: our thankfulness.

*The work that we do each day is part of our thankfulness for the salvation work that Christ did for us*

Too often we head off to work with certain goals in our mind. We work to save up for college. We work to pay off the mortgage. We work to build up a company. Whatever the case, we let a future goal motivate us in our present toil. Of course, it's not wrong to work with a set purpose in mind. But it is far more enjoyable if we begin by working *out of gratitude* before we start labouring *toward a goal*. Then your work ethic takes on this doctrinally sound tone: since my Saviour worked so inexpressibly hard for my salvation, I will work hard each day to show him how thankful I am.

## Church

There is a common misunderstanding about the church. It is that Christ's church is put on pause when the worship service ends. And then, the pause button is released when we come back to worship next Sunday.

Such a notion is theologically incorrect. Christ is “an eternal King who cannot be without subjects” (BC 27), not on Mondays, Wednesdays, or Saturdays either. So, even when the worship services are over, the church still exists. This also means that on Monday morning we go off to our respective workplaces still knit closely together by the Holy Spirit as the one body of our ascended Lord Jesus Christ.

Allow me to illustrate the point. Early each morning work crews assemble in the yard of a landscaping company. Some take a truck, with mowers and weed-eaters, and off they go to do lawn maintenance. Other crews load up with stone, soil, and plant material. Off they go, blueprints in hand, to various construction projects. Each crew goes in a different direction to a different task. Still, they all work toward a common goal under one company banner (duly painted on the side of the trucks).

Sundays are something like those early mornings in the landscaping yard. On the Lord’s Day we load up our hearts with spiritual supplies, tools, instructions, and encouragements. Then, Monday morning we all head off, like different crews ready to tackle different tasks. Still, we all work under the one banner of Christ, serving his cause and his kingdom. In this sense, even if you don’t work with fellow church members, by faith you understand that your closest co-workers are the people who share a pew with you, not necessarily those who share a payroll with you.

## Last things

Work does not last forever. Or does it? On the one hand, we need to uphold the truth Revelation 14:13. The voice from heaven said, “Write: Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord. . . . They will rest from their labour.” Our gracious God has so designed our future that all the sweat and curse-induced thistle-pulling does, one day, come to end. Thankfully so!

On the other hand, we need to uphold *all* the truth of Revelation 14:13. For the same voice continues, “They will rest from their labour, for their deeds will follow them.” Certainly our deeds do not precede us into eternal life. We do not come before the throne of God with life’s labours in hand, seeking to claim some credit for them from our Creator. After all, even our best deeds are nothing more than filthy rags (Isa 64:6). Instead, we enter God’s throne room relying in faith on the perfect atoning work of our beloved Saviour Jesus Christ.

And yet, according to God’s own Word, our deeds – sanctified to be sure by the blood and Spirit of Christ – do follow us across the border line between this life and the next. It’s something to think about the next time you settle into yet another day of work. If today’s deeds will somehow become, by God’s grace, part of eternity’s glory. . . well, that sheds a different light on matters, doesn’t it?

Are you off to work now? Got your lunch? Good. Got your doctrine, too? Great. Have a most enjoyable day, as you give yourself fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labour in the Lord is not in vain. **C**

