

# spirituality of Monday to Saturday

Alex Bunn considers our calling to the 9 to 5 window

Work is what you do when you'd rather be somewhere else, right? And maybe as a Christian you feel that the important spiritual work is done by pastors and evangelists, something of eternal value. After all, this world is going to be incinerated? Perhaps the best you can do is use medicine as a means for mission, or at least earn enough to support others in it. Surveys show that as few as 1% of medical students feel that medicine is a vocation rather than simply a job.

I want to challenge these ideas as unbiblical, and deeply unhelpful. I'd like to give a history of work through the four chapters of creation, fall, redemption and future hope. But let's start with the basic issue of how the world of work relates to the spiritual world.



## what is spiritual work?

How would you define the spiritual? Popular culture tends to characterise it as something intangible,

mystical or immaterial, a word which also means irrelevant! But if God is Spirit, then the spiritual is the 'ultimately real'. And whatever he does is spiritual, and that includes work. In Genesis, God works at all kinds of things, including creation. In making man, he gets his hands dirty, quite unlike other religions, where such work would be quite unfitting for an exalted god.<sup>1</sup> For instance, here God gives his muddy earth-man the kiss of life:

'Then the LORD God formed a man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being.'<sup>2</sup>

The God of the Bible has dirt under his fingernails! Therefore the material world was not intrinsically bad, as many pagans believe, but was 'very good'. And when we work we are simply following in the family business. I remember as a boy visiting my dad in a GP surgery, the sickly smell of disinfectant, the strange chrome instruments. But I remember a quiet thrill that one day perhaps, if I worked very hard, I could follow in his footsteps. God doesn't just hope we will follow in his, he commands it:

'Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground.'<sup>3</sup>



## creating the family firm: Jehovah, sons, and daughters

Any work that fulfils this command is to some

degree spiritual, in the sense that this kind of work imitates God, who is Spirit. He wants to see creation flourish. He wants us to be his deputies as we harness and develop its potential under his beneficent rule. Whatever commandments followed this first great commission, it has never been repealed. It's not obligatory, but if and when someone takes time out of medicine to have a family, they are simply obeying God's command. Breeding can be an act of obedience to God!

But God had many other jobs in his family firm: agriculture,<sup>4</sup> industry,<sup>5</sup> and the 'humanities',<sup>6</sup> which were in fact God's idea. Adam comes up with the first poem,<sup>7</sup> and the



**Alex Bunn**  
is CMF Southern Team Leader  
and a GP in London

Spirit inspires arts and craft, including weavers, embroidery, jewel work and carpentry for his home in the temple. It's not as if God needed help, but from the outset he delighted in drawing us into a partnership. For instance, in Genesis 2 God plants precious and useful minerals into the rocks. It's like a treasure hunt for man to track down and extract them for his purposes. God could have dumped raw materials in a warehouse in Eden, but instead he wanted us to be partners in bringing abundance to creation. Another example is man's first lesson in taxonomy:

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'Now the LORD God had formed out of the ground all the beasts of the field and all the birds of the air. He brought them to the man to see what he would name them'<sup>8</sup>

Have you ever named a family pet? Naming meant more than mere affection; it was a means of mastery. You can imagine Adam carefully observing and categorising each animal. One has large muscles and broad shoulders, so he concludes 'this could pull a plough, let's call him horse'. Thus science was born, observing, understanding and mastering the material world. Even today the majority of medicines are natural derivatives, locked up in plants until their discovery. Aspirin, digoxin, vincristine, penicillin, lignocaine are no accidents of nature. Thank God for them, Eden's medicine cabinet!



### fall: double double, toil and trouble

All well and good, but work is not always something to celebrate.

Ever since Adam's

rebellion against the family director (the fall), work became conflict. Work was no longer a fruitful partnership, but painful and sweaty toil amongst thorns and thistles.

Medics will recognise work-related illnesses: hernias, migraine, repetitive stress injury, conflicts leading to depression, fatigue and frustration. A colleague once ordered a Chinese take-away on call, but didn't get to eat it until the early hours. After reheating it the next thing he remembered was a piercing bleep. He was late for his consultant ward round, and he had fallen asleep in the gloopy sweet and sour, orange sauce all down his sweaty shirt, before he had taken a bite. Even worse, work can feel futile. Just as you clerk the last patient on take, at the end of your physical and emotional reserves, another six arrive in the big white taxi, many of whom you recognise from takes in the last month. Like taking your hand out of a bucket of water, you ask what impression have I left? What lasting difference have I made?



### redemption: dignity bestowed

We have seen that God has always been a worker,<sup>9</sup> and thankfully he never gave up on the family

firm. He handpicked a few apprentices to rebuild it, through the patriarchs (Abraham's family) and began an epic salvage project.

They were led into a land of abundance, 'milk and honey'. And the Law of Moses enshrined all kinds of measures to restrain the consequences of the fall, such as limitations on debt, slavery, and the Sabbath 'working time directive'.<sup>10</sup> The prophets looked forward to a Messianic age, when nature 'red in tooth and claw' would become responsive and harmonious again under the family firm, a final reversal of the fall.<sup>11</sup>

Unfortunately, this ultimate goal could not be achieved merely by tinkering with company regulations, such as the Mosaic Law. The boss needed to step down to the shop floor and rebuild the firm from the bottom up.<sup>12</sup>

The incarnation of Jesus has been described as God's confidence vote in humanity and in the physical world. Not that God turned a blind eye to the vandalism on the shop floor. Rather he decided it was worth salvaging, even by entering into it. Jesus developed like any other foetus, had nappies changed, lived through ordinary developmental milestones, even puberty, just like you and me. At every stage he reclaimed man's dignity by living as God in human flesh. It's a shame that secular humanists don't recognise the source of human dignity that they so value. We are so much more than hairless apes with wristwatches!

Jesus also worked. Like father, like son. But he did not just engage in what we call 'spiritual work', preaching and evangelism. Like his father, he brought life wherever he went, at parties, road trips, singing, joking, eating and yes, drinking. He was even criticised for being too much fun.<sup>13</sup> These activities are therefore not intrinsically unspiritual, because God himself engaged in them. But Jesus also experienced toil in work, like you and me: splinters in his fingers, backache, fatigue, hunger, thirst, as well as misunderstandings,

rejection, beatings and ultimately the cross. His greatest work was to reconcile man to God, to work for man what man could not do for himself.



### future hope: living and working splendidly

Jesus' work on the cross is God's means of justifying sinful man to

a holy God. But the good news is even bigger than the destiny of you and me as individuals. When Jesus appeared resurrected at the garden tomb, he launched the new creation, just as his Father first unveiled the first Adam in the garden he had planted. No wonder then that his son Jesus was mistaken for a gardener by Mary!<sup>14</sup> After his resurrection, Jesus' body displayed less of the fragility we are used to. For instance, he suddenly 'appeared' behind locked doors!<sup>15</sup> But he was also the Jesus his friends remembered, who ate and drank with them, and was insistent that he was not some disembodied phantom!

'Touch me and see; a ghost does not have flesh and bones, as you see I have.'<sup>16</sup>

Jesus' body is the prototype for the transformation of everything salvageable within the Father's creation: recognisably the same, yet different: glorious, immortal, heavenly, splendid!<sup>17</sup> God's purpose, then, is a cosmic restoration project that began with one body in Jerusalem in AD33, but will eventually restore everything under God's rule and blessing,<sup>18</sup> although there will be terrible consequences and regret for those that did not submit willingly.<sup>19</sup>

When God wraps up history, the old order will pass away, but we will not be beamed up to a

ghostly heaven to escape this world's incineration.<sup>20</sup> Rather, heaven will come down to meet a transformed and renewed physical earth:

'I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God...He who was seated on the throne said, "I am making everything new!"'<sup>21</sup>

The promise of something new (*kainos* in Greek) could mean two things. Suppose your laptop got corrupted, and you visited the Apple store. They could destroy the old one and give you a new one with a blank drive. Or they could take your precious old one with its treasures of a lifetime, and salvage it, debug it and restore its settings. Many commentators believe it is the second meaning in view here, a renewed, restored, refreshed and revitalised new existence.

Perhaps a joke will help clarify the distinction. Q. How many pedants does it take to change a lightbulb? A. Change or replace?! Just as Christ's body was changed not replaced, and his followers are renewed rather than replaced,<sup>22</sup> so everything worth keeping, worth salvaging, worth celebrating will be there:

'The city does not need the sun or the moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and the Lamb is its lamp. The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their splendour into it.'<sup>23</sup>

So heaven will be both continuous and discontinuous with our present existence. Clearly we don't yet see God's glory filling the world; we don't walk in step with God as he intended, and as Adam briefly did,<sup>24</sup> so there will be a massive transformation. But heaven may not be the end of the world! Its possible that I need to be prepared to live in Hackney

## Work matters

- We work because God the Father and Son work. It's a privilege to work for the family firm whatever our role
- God's first command remains: to be productive in whatever he has gifted us for
- Anything done in imitation of Christ and for God's glory is of eternal value
- We need to be made ready for our work in heaven: to love as God loves. We need to start now!

for ever, but a Hackney transformed. This story started in God's garden, and ends in a city, a human innovation. It started as a partnership in the family firm, and will continue so into eternity. God so values our contributions, in his grace, that he intends to welcome anything splendid and glorious of man's work into the new order. It's hard to imagine what the Bible only hints at, but what might you contribute to heaven?



## called to the 9 to 5 window: how should I work now?

So how should this affect my life now? Our work has eternal significance

because we work for the God who is working to make a people for himself, to glorify and enjoy him forever in a liberated creation. It's hard to know how every detail of our work might count, but we follow Jesus' example in doing all for the Father's glory. We will not divide life into sacred and secular parts:

'And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.'<sup>25</sup>

Of course when we share Christ with others we both love our neighbour and God, as this is

what our neighbour needs and God wants<sup>26</sup>. Many of us are called to remain in secular work,<sup>27</sup> but to work with this very non-secular motivation. We haven't got space to address calling fully, but don't despise the place God has put you. Don't try to change how God has made you unique. Ask yourself or your friends what you excel at, and what you can do that no-one else is placed to.<sup>28</sup> The Olympic athlete Eric Liddel was tempted to leave running in favour of missionary work. In the film *Chariots of Fire* he reflects 'I believe God made me for a purpose, but he also made me fast. And when I run I feel his pleasure'. In the event his gold medal won him a far bigger audience for Christ than if he had ignored his God given talent. Think strategically, such as where are the needs greatest, the workers fewest, the temptations manageable. Ask how work will fit with family and church life.

Paul gave this advice to slaves, which might equally apply to students and junior doctors:

'Serve wholeheartedly (with zeal, enthusiasm, eagerness), as if you were serving the Lord, not men, because you know that the Lord will reward everyone for whatever good he does.'<sup>29</sup>

So what kind of work would God reward? Well, not just evangelism, but washing floors, cleaning laundry, changing nappies, emptying

bins...everything done for God's glory: calming the alcoholic urinating in the casualty bin on Saturday night, disimpacting the howling dementia patient, writing a thorough essay, comforting a depressed friend, answering emails promptly. Do you ever go to work and say 'today I am going to work for Jesus'? 'I'm changing this IV for Jesus'? 'I'm disposing of my clinical waste for Jesus'?

Some might still say that doctors, pathologists and coroners will be redundant in the renewed heaven and earth, as there will be no disease or death. Perhaps so, but we know that some things are eternal:

'And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.'<sup>30</sup>

Love is never wasted. Who can guess what work will look like in heaven? But we know that God's work has always been an expression of love, and self-giving *agape* love will continue into the next life. Medicine can be pretty gruelling, but perhaps when we are challenged to love sacrificially like God himself, wholeheartedly, generously, and unconditionally, we are being reshaped for heaven. What a privilege.

Amen. Come Lord Jesus!<sup>31</sup> ■

REFERENCES

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| <p>1. Compare Genesis with creation myths such as the Babylonian Enuma Elish in which mankind is a slave race created to do the gods' dirty work</p> <p>2. Genesis 2:7</p> <p>3. Genesis 1:28</p> <p>4. Genesis 2:6,15</p> <p>5. Genesis 2:12</p> <p>6. Genesis 4:21</p> <p>7. Genesis 2:23</p> <p>8. Genesis 2:19</p> <p>9. John 5:17</p> <p>10. Exodus 31:12-17</p> <p>11. Ezekiel 47:1-12, Isaiah 11:6-9</p> | <p>12. Luke 20:9-19</p> <p>13. Matthew 11:19</p> <p>14. John 20:15</p> <p>15. John 20:19, 26</p> <p>16. Luke 24:39</p> <p>17. 1 Corinthians 15:35-54</p> <p>18. Ephesians 1:9-10</p> <p>19. Philippians 2:9, Matthew 8:12, 13:42, 22:13, 25:30, Luke 13:28</p> <p>20. 2 Peter 3:10-12 is a single text that challenges this view, as it seems to say that the old order will be burned up or destroyed, but many commentators think that as elsewhere in Scripture, fire is</p> | <p>being used to purge, deep clean or heal the old creation, rather than annihilate it</p> <p>21. Revelation 21:2,5</p> <p>22. 2 Corinthians 5:17</p> <p>23. Revelation 21:23-24, alluding to Isaiah 60</p> <p>24. Genesis 3:8</p> <p>25. Colossians 3:17</p> <p>26. 1 Timothy 2:4</p> <p>27. 1 Corinthians 7:17-24</p> <p>28. Ephesians 2:10</p> <p>29. Ephesians 6:7,8 (authors words in brackets)</p> <p>30. 1 Corinthians 13:13</p> <p>31. Revelation 22:20</p> |
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