



feature



anointing God's feet:

putting God at the
centre of our work

Steve Fouch reflects on the
biblical message about
whole-life discipleship and
the kingdom of God at work

At a meeting of a mission network that I helped to convene many years ago, we were looking at how medical mission work could measure and manage its impact on the physical and spiritual health of the communities it served. A couple chatted to me in the coffee break, telling me about their work leading a medical mission and how distracting they found it to be constantly dragged away from their spiritual work by worldly work like administration, finances and fundraising.

I was stunned at first, that two Christians working in the frontline of cross-cultural mission had such a divided view of work. But to be honest, it came as no real surprise. I often hear, implicitly or explicitly in church that some kinds of work are spiritual, and some are worldly. Teaching or leading worship, or being in prayer ministry, or on an evangelism team are often elevated as the most spiritual work we can do. Just below this is teaching in Sunday school, followed by being on the church council (where discussions on the type of communion wine or the sort of coffee cups we use are common causes of epic debate!) and below that (indeed, all but ignored) are the roles of church administrator and the cleaner. Work outside of church is never discussed as

Christian ministry at all. I hope you are at a church that both in words and deeds does not create such a spiritual hierarchy of work, but I expect most of us would recognise this divide.

God's view of work

Right from the start of Genesis, we learn that our God is a working God. He laboured to create the cosmos, rejoicing over every element of it,¹ before resting and contemplating all he had made.² There was no sense that any of his work was more or less worthy, valuable, or holy in his eyes. Then, when he created humanity, he charged us to carry on his work, stewarding and tending his creation.³

When we work, we serve as 'God's hands and feet', caring for our world and other people in different ways, using whatever gifts and opportunities God gives us. Work is more than earning a living; it is about creating space for God's kingdom to break in and shape our world.⁴ Work was created to be a joyful act of creativity and service to God, other people and his creation. However, because of the fall we now find work (even at its most enjoyable) laborious, frustrating and stressful to one degree or another.⁵

We see this in two stories from John's gospel. When Jesus is anointed by Mary at Bethany on

his way to Jerusalem,⁶ it is an extravagant gesture of worship, giving the equivalent of a year's work in one gesture of love and service. But when they get to Jerusalem, in the upper room, Jesus then washes his disciples' feet – showing a God who serves and sets an example of service to us.⁷ God washes our feet as we serve him, so we anoint his feet though our work.

This changes our perspective; work is not a punishment or a grim necessity, at least in its origins. It is a good gift from God to bless us and through it we bless others⁸ and the whole creation, sharing in God's creative and redeeming work in the world and in so doing, worshipping him. We are working towards an end – God's new creation – his new heavens and new earth. 'There is a future healed world that he will bring about, and your work is showing it (in part) to others.'⁹

OK, let's be honest, on a Monday morning sitting bleary eyed in the ward office with a mug of coffee before checking the electronic handover notes for the coming shift, work might not feel so God-ordained. On a Sunday evening, after our fourth twelve-hour shift in a row and contemplating the sheer ecstasy of a night's sleep and a day off, our work probably feels even less like a divine calling. But as Tim

Keller says, 'No task is too small a vessel to hold the immense dignity of work given by God.'¹⁰ Even writing up care plans and doing ward administration is God given work that we can do to his glory.

It is about our inner orientation towards God, rather than external circumstances. Do we see our work as an opportunity to serve God, his creation and our fellow human beings, or just as something we must do to pay the bills? That orientation has a lot to do with what used to be called 'vocation', or more commonly (in Christian circles at least) our sense of 'calling'.

calling

What does it mean to be 'called' to a work or a career? I remember spending my teens, twenties and thirties trying to work this out, always suspecting that I was not fulfilling my true calling because work seemed so hard, or because I felt I was following the vision and direction of others rather than my own. I was worried I had not been listening to God. Surely, I should be doing something more exciting, fulfilling and 'spiritual' than the often dull and mundane work that I was doing? Where was my vision, my passion?

It was some time before I realised that I was exactly where God wanted me to be. Not

because I heard trumpet calls from the sky, not because I felt especially confident and passionate about all aspects of my work, not even because I saw huge fruit from my labours. It was simply that when I stopped and looked around I noticed two things. First, all that I had done, learned and experienced in so many jobs that did not always fill me with passion had nevertheless uniquely equipped me to do the work I was doing. Second, I had supportive people around, working and praying with me.

You may have heard a trumpet call to nursing or midwifery. You may have a huge passion – maybe for a particular aspect of your profession, or to a particular nation or area of ministry to which your profession gives you unique access. For several years for me it was to work with gay men living with HIV and AIDS. Being a nurse opened a doorway that being a heterosexual Christian male would otherwise have slammed shut.

Alternatively, you may have stumbled into your career, and then discovered that this is something you were always meant to be doing. Or you may still be trying to work all of this out and asking if you really are called to this work – does it fit my character, gifting and passions?

I was greatly encouraged when a speaker at a conference last summer made the point that Abraham was 75 when God called him.¹¹ He spent decades just being an ordinary man tending his flocks and cattle. Jesus spent the first three decades of his life being a carpenter in an insignificant village. If you are wondering where God is calling you, it may be that these are just your ‘carpentry years’, and you have an ‘apprenticeship’ to serve before God shows you what he wants you to do.

I have friends who have had varied and diverse careers, never quite finding their calling until later in life. One served in the army as a nurse, a clinical measurements specialist, then as a liaison with the Department of Health when his military hospital was handed over to the NHS. After retiring from the army, he helped lead a local church in various capacities before being ordained. He became particularly adept at ministering to the bereaved and members of the church family and local community facing difficult illnesses. Then, in his sixties he had the opportunity to serve as a hospital chaplain. He asked everyone who knew him if this might be an opportunity from God, to which we all said ‘Yes!’ He ended up being a spiritual support to a whole hospital, from CEO to domestic staff, as it went through CQC and Monitor special measures after the Francis Report. His whole

career had been preparation for a role for which God had uniquely gifted him.

Another point that Abraham's story (and my friend's) illustrates is that calling is never in isolation. We are called to serve God as a community, and our individual part in that calling is discerned and worked out with others. That will include your church, your family and your colleagues. So always seek prayer and wisdom from others to see what God may be saying. Others will see details and perspectives that we miss. God did not make us to work alone.¹²

so how do we worship God in our work?

We have evolved a practical theology in many churches that worship means singing, dancing and praying out loud. And these are all very biblical means of worship. But worship is so much more than just that hour or so on a Sunday.

Paul tells us to use our bodies to glorify God. Not primarily in our spirits, our minds or even our words, but in our bodies.¹³ Our bodies are where our spirits and minds meet the world. Our bodies give our words sound and shape. We act out in our bodies individually what is in our

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inner being, but also what we do with our bodies shapes our inner self.

What is more, our individual bodies act together with other believers to form the body of Christ.¹⁴ As with our body's organs, so each of us plays a vital part in what God is doing in the world. By extension, when you are working with your midwifery or nursing team you are an integral part of what that team is doing, and your role is as vital as anyone else's. So how we work, how we act, how we use our individual bodies as part of that 'bigger body' is our true and spiritual worship. Whether that is dealing with admin, changing beds, holding the hand of a dying patient or writing up our notes, all we do in our bodies can be an act of worship.¹⁵ It is, once again, about our orientation towards God.

Taking time in the sluice, staff room or office to say a swift, silent prayer of thanks, or to intercede for a colleague, patient or ourselves, is a good idea. Finding others to pray with before or after a shift, or in break time can be invaluable as well. Bring God into your workplace (he is there already, but he is waiting for you to notice him and talk to him about it). Keep that 'upward' orientation towards him throughout the day, so that every bit of your work, mundane or marvellous, unpleasant or joyful, is transformed into work you do with

and for God, for his glory and his kingdom. And others will see that.¹⁶

Finally, remember that Jesus told us to live in the present, in the day that God has given us.¹⁷ Pray at the start of the day for the day ahead. Pray at the end and note all that God has done and shown you. Be thankful! Find others with whom to share your thanksgiving and prayer. And remember, nothing is wasted in God's economy. You may never see the fruit of your labours in this life, but Jesus will reveal them when he returns.¹⁸ 🙏

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| 1. Genesis 1 | 8. Ephesians 2:10 |
| 2. Genesis 2:1-3 | 9. Keller T. Op cit:30 |
| 3. Genesis 1:27-30 | 10. Keller T, Op cit:49 |
| 4. Keller T. <i>Every Good Endeavour: Connecting Your Work to God's Plan for the World</i> . London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2012:21 | 11. Genesis 12:4 |
| 5. Genesis 3:17-19 | 12. Genesis 2:18 |
| 6. John 12:1-8 | 13. Romans 12:1-2 |
| 7. John 13:1-17 | 14. Romans 12:4-8 |
| | 15. Colossians 3:17 |
| | 16. Matthew 5:16 |
| | 17. Matthew 6:34 |
| | 18. 1 Corinthians 3:10-15 |