

### III. Work:

## excerpts from *The Church Beyond the Congregation*

### All Things Work Together For Good

Dorothy Sayers, a colleague of C.S. Lewis, writing many years ago, had this to say concerning the church and everyday working life: "In nothing has the church so lost her hold on reality as in her failure to understand and respect the secular vocation. She has allowed work and religion to become separate departments and is astonished to find that, as a result, the secular work of the world is turned to purely selfish and destructive ends and that the greater part of the world's intelligent workers have become irreligious, or at least, uninterested in religion. But is it so astonishing? How can anyone remain interested in a religion which seems to have no concern with nine-tenths of his life?"<sup>1</sup> If this was the case almost five decades ago, then the reality she speaks of is ever more pressing (and depressing!) today. The sad fact is that Satan has worked overtime to separate the body of Christ from the redemptive impact our work is meant to have on creation. Satan always divides to conquer and his strategy is clearly evident in relation to the saints and their working life. God, however, always unites that he might rule. Such being the case, what are we to make of the third unseen sphere of the created order called work? In this time of great challenge and many changes the answer, I believe, is a resounding – much!

#### The good working verse

The phrase "God works all things together for good" (Rom. 8:28) is, I believe, the single most strategic verse found in Scripture. It brings together all the key elements of the creation reality we have looked at. The creation, as we know, cries out for the sons to come. How can we answer such an immense cry? Verses 26 and 27 tell us that the Holy Spirit responds to our weakness by searching out this answer from the depths of God. The answer comes as a sound, a groaning "too deep for words". This answer from the Father arrives in our lives as intercession. It is a deep sound and travail coming into and through our lives, resonating in us "according to the will of God". It is verse 28 that follows which speaks to us of the nature and purpose of this amazing sound.

The verb "we know" found in verse 28 is in the perfect tense. This tense speaks of a present state arriving as a result of past actions. Hence we could render verse 28 in this way: "As a result (of the Spirit's searching out the will of God) we now know that for the ones loving God he continually goes on working all things into (or unto – *eis*) the good." Here we discover two key things about the sound of the Father coming through the Spirit to the sons. Firstly, as a result of the Spirit's search, we now know that the eternal purpose for the new man is that he work all things in creation together in such a way as to bring about ultimate good. Secondly, we learn that the nature of and motivation for this work keeps on arriving in the new man through the sound that comes from the Father.

#### How does good work work?

This placement of the saints' good works at the heart of the divine strategy arises naturally from the creation reality God established in the beginning. Man and creation are mutually dependent, unable to come into their created purpose apart

from each other. Creation needs man's work to come into its fulfilment and man needs to steward the creation through his work to come into his inheritance. It follows from this that, if God declared the creation to be "good" and if man is called to work the creation, then by this work he must be able to bring forth, or realise, that "good". The goodness of creation is another way of expressing its "fullness". This is evident in the well-known verse – "The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof".<sup>ii</sup> The goodness of the earth is to be brought forth, made manifest and enjoyed through all of the saints' works in the creation.

## **Restoration that works**

The teaching in Romans 8 lines up directly with the Genesis account. To this day the creation is crying out for its completion. The sons of God are still waiting to come into their inheritance in and over the creation. The relationship between the creation and the sons is, as mentioned, first established through mutual travail and suffering. From there, as verse 28 informs us, it is the good works of the sons and daughters that bring fulfilment to the creation. This amazing verse, found at the very peak of Romans, serves as the most succinct summary of that divine strategy we saw unfolded in the city of Ephesus.

What then is the creation crying out for? It must be crying out for its goodness to be fully realised and fully released. The creation cannot be good apart from the sons and daughters because we alone were given the right to name it; we are the image bearers who were made to speak moral value and divine intent into it. We were created to draw forth the attributes, nature and power of God in all things. Our calling to 'good work' the earth is in fact God's way of uniting us to all of creation. It is the God-given means through which we can fully answer creation's cry and thereby come into our inheritance in and over all things in Christ. This is why the creation to this day looks forward, waiting in eager anticipation for the time when it will enjoy the fullest measure of the "freedom of the glory of the children of God".<sup>iii</sup> A life lived 'good working' all things of creation towards the good is a life most definitely lived "according to his purpose". This is what the sound from the Father comes to accomplish. It is this sound, Jesus said, which we can hear and must follow. Is it any wonder this answer from the depths of God is too deep for words to encompass!

John the Baptist restored the sphere of family to make way for Christ the Son. Jesus cleansed and restored the sphere of marriage to make way for his bride the church to come. From there the new man, with the power of identity drawn from marriage and family, enters into his purpose. Now the Holy Spirit comes to fill and empower the saints to declare into and engage the creation through the good works prepared for them from eternity. The fall, as devastating and far-reaching as its consequences were, was only an interruption to the eternal purposes of God to create a people who would reign through love and righteousness and relate to his attributes, nature and power throughout all of life. This sovereign purpose is now amplified and lifted higher by the Last Adam, the life-giving Spirit. Now sin is nullified, death is abolished and the law fulfilled; now it is the new man, the new creation in Christ, who has become, as Galatians 6:16 says, "*the rule*". The truth seen here at the summit is a revelation of divine strategy given to us to profoundly influence the whole way we relate to life and be the church.

## **Good works are everywhere**

From here let us turn to look at the numerous places "good works" are referred to in Scripture. We do this to demonstrate the extent to which our works feature in

God's plan for our lives. What we find is that the major focus of Scripture, when speaking of our purpose as saints on the earth, centres on our good works. From the very foundations of the earth these works were prepared for us by our Father, readied by him for us to walk in. As we saw in the verse from Ephesians, we were created in Christ Jesus for the specific purpose of engaging in good works prepared beforehand by God. Again the Colossians' truth comes into view, telling us how the knowledge of God's will journeys through wisdom into a life lived in "every good work" to produce the fruit that leads to the knowledge of God himself. Here again good works are heralded as the mechanism by which our inheritance in creation and our relationship with God arrive. The Word of God is inspired and profitable for all things, yes, but it has as its stated purpose the equipping of the saint "for every good work".<sup>iv</sup> Also the ministry gifts, those first expressions of the risen Christ, have at the very head of their job description the mandate to "equip the saints for works of service".

Finally we come to that well-known statement by Jesus: "Let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works and glorify your Father who is in heaven."<sup>v</sup> Remember the divine strategy of the restoration of all things? We saw in that teaching of Scripture the way in which the spheres of creation came into darkness and futility after the fall; how the light of God that was meant to shine through them shone no longer. Here, plainly stated by the Lord of creation, is this same divine strategy. It is our good works that bring in the restoration of the spheres of creation engaged by that work. These good works, done in God and for God, will unlock the divine intent of the creation itself. They will reveal the attributes, nature and power and, ultimately, the goodness of God in this land of the living. Our "good work" dispels the gloom, ends the futility and banishes the lies that came into the creation because of the evil works of darkness. The restoration, accomplished through work, is that which enables divine light and life to shine through the all things of creation. This is why Jesus said that when they "see your good works" they will be able to encounter and glorify your Father in the heavens above.

Only via this God-given way can the new man emerge to become the light of the world. This new man, coming through suffering to good work the creation, is the one God foreknew, predestined, called, justified and glorified to bring in the fullness. From eternity and into time the purpose of God has never changed. The image bearer was always called to release and realise the image from every facet of creation. He was forever destined to come to maturity through this way of life and work, thereby entering into his rule in the Son over all of creation. That is why God to this day still works all things together for good to those who love him and are called according to his purpose. Yes, Jesus will come again and he will complete the restoration. But in the meantime, while it is still today, we *must* work the works of him who sent us.

### **Paid work is good work**

The apostle Paul, in his letter to the saints at Colossae, tells us about the crucial connection God has made between working life and good work. He says, "Whatever you do, do your work heartily, as for the Lord rather than for men; knowing that from the Lord you will receive the reward of the inheritance. It is the Lord Christ whom you serve."<sup>vi</sup> The logic is simple: whenever we work we work ultimately for Christ. It is him we serve and it is from him that we receive our reward. So it follows that our everyday work should not be named anything else except good work. The setting in which the work is done does not make that work sacred or secular. Evil works can be done in any context, church based or otherwise. The setting is not the thing that makes them either good or bad; rather it is the nature and intent of them that determines their eternal worth.

The difficulty many people have in believing the work they do to make a living is “good work” arises mostly from the fact that they get paid for it. “Surely only volunteer or charitable work or one’s work for the church can truly be good?” The creation reality clearly informs us that we were made to work the earth in order to bring forth its goodness and its fullness. That eternal purpose has never been revoked. It certainly has never been divided into sacred and secular. So it is that whenever we work we must work for the good rather than for the money. At its heart our work is a giving and a sowing into the earth to release the ‘goods’ in the creation. When this is done we receive the response of the earth and of others into our life. “Give and it shall be given unto you” is not just a novel idea, it is a creation secret for all of our work in life. You were created to give to others, so when you serve others and do the good, the return, pressed down and shaken together, will come to you. This creation truth thus unites all of our work under the powerful banner of good.

In Ephesians 6:7, 8 we read, “With good will render service, as to the Lord and not to men, knowing that whatever good thing each one does, this he will receive back from the Lord, whether slave or free.” Work is clearly listed here under the heading of the good things we are called to accomplish. From this work we receive back from the Lord the blessing of the return. The Colossians’ verse we looked at calls this return “the reward of our inheritance”, thus pointing us in the direction that our work will take in the plan of God. I also draw attention to Ephesians 4:28 that refers to the place of work in the sanctification and maturation of the saint. Finally, in 1 Thessalonians 4:11 we see that our working life is one of the important things that leads to our living of a “quiet life”. This phrase makes an appearance in the strategic passage we considered from Timothy where a “quiet life in all godliness and dignity” is an important part of the divine plan in bringing in the restoration.

Our paid and personal work is essential to the divine plan. It is direct work for Christ. It releases our inheritance in Christ and over the creation. It unlocks the good things that God has placed in the creation that our needs might be supplied. It is used by the Spirit to sanctify and mature us; and finally it is strategically placed to impact a city by ushering in and demonstrating the peace and dignity of God to those outside the faith. This work can certainly be done in the setting of the church as pillar and support. However, again I emphasise that it is only the works done by the saints in the spheres of creation that have the ability to fulfil the eternal purpose. The church as a separate organisation cannot of itself fill marriage, family, business, health, education, government and recreation. The saints can and the saints must. The division is over. All the works of the saint are meant to be good works.

Your work, paid or unpaid, is before you every day of your life. How do we go into that work to find the fullness and gather the inheritance? How might we transform it from a responsibility to a discovery zone? Let’s go into work to go through to go up into the fullness. As mentioned, God created the “unseen” systems engaged by work so that man could accomplish the eternal purpose. We see these administrations of God throughout Scripture and we see their power today in determining the culture and destiny of every man. As mentioned, the names we have generally given to these systems are – Government, Education, Health, Business and Recreation. I would not want to give the impression that these are fixed categories with firewalls between them. They are dynamic and interacting spheres of human life, defined partially in themselves and mostly in relationship to each other. In the heart of God they no doubt are grouped together and named differently. Business might have much more to do with poetry than we could ever have imagined! However, this

is the way we presently name them and hence this is the usual way we presently identify ourselves with them.

In working life these systems will overlap. In particular the business dimension will be found in one way or another in all of the other spheres. A medical centre will have a healing, educational and business dimension. A school will have an educational and business dimension. A small goods firm will have a business dimension and perhaps a training component. What of media? This world of print and electronic communication is drawn from the systems of recreation, education and business. It is not a separate system of itself. There is also work done in the setting of the home, something not measured in monetary terms, but which is essential to the good of our society. To look into the nature of work we need to make the complex mosaic simple, knowing that the principles that apply to the above mentioned five spheres of creation engaged by work relate to all activity/work in life.

### **Call it good**

We have looked at the nature of the creation existing in the Son of God. In the Garden we saw the 'hiddenness' of God in the all things of the creation. We saw the glory of God to conceal so that man might reach for and discover his glory. We looked at the judgements of God after the fall that overlaid the full creation inheritance with thorns, sweat and travail. We have seen the Son of God standing through the created order as God made man; his body, the fullness of all things, existing in him right through the spheres of marriage, family and work. We have looked at the eternal purpose of God who "works all things together into the good", seeing there the strategic relationship between our work, the good and the all things of creation.

It is in this creation reality and eternal purpose that we must place our daily work. Our starting point is to decide on the primary name we will give to our work. Knowing that work existed as a creation mandate before the fall, we can and we must name our work with the name God gave it in the beginning, that being – "good". Paul looked into the tyranny of Roman government and said it was "a minister of God to you for good". He knew the power of such a sight and such a name. He knew how important it was to orientate the saints to the goodness of this creation sphere in order that they might draw from it the maximum measure of God's good into their lives. If Paul did this for an organisation led by the likes of Nero, then you will surely be able to do the same for the work you are presently engaged in!

So then, what is the good? The good is the qualitative difference and contribution something makes to the glory of God and the life of man. This is a good start, but as our Hebrew verse from Colossians informs us, the knowledge of truth is only the starting point. We must press in much further if we are to gain the inheritance and come to the knowledge of God himself. Going into the good is more like mining along a seam of gold, drawing out more and more as you move in. There is no static definition for good. There is, however, the good life that keeps on going into the inheritance in Christ.

### **Go for good**

In line with the teaching in Romans 1:20, our work involves us in a search for God's "invisible attributes, his eternal power and divine nature". We are called to search out the attributes of God in the people, place and events in our work. We draw these out and "work them" to establish the nature of God in our work. As we do this we make manifest the power of the good. As Romans 8:28 indicates, we work all things in such a way that the good arises and is established. This good is the tangible

effect (eternal power) the invisible attributes and divine nature have as they are outworked in relational life. There are so many attributes in the many facets of a working relationship that we can draw out. They speak to, resonate with and call out to each other. "What is right" speaks to "what is pure", what is "lovely" resonates with what "is of good repute" and what partakes of "excellence" calls out to all things "worthy of praise". We need to learn to hear them and respond – for they are the very cry of creation calling our name, longing for fulfilment.

## **Finders keepers**

The qualities within all things, people and events are the potential waiting for the fullness, the treasure waiting to be discovered. They are not a dim reflection of the real and removed God of elsewhere. They are not concepts and feelings pointing away to a Platonic realm of perfect forms and ideals. They are the manifestation of God – the expression, the fragrance, the language, the water and the breath emerging from the 'hiddenness' to be found by you and to find you. We have been so restrained in our going into this life by our otherworldly orientation and misconstrued fear of idolatry or materialism. However, once we know the essence within the form of things we can begin to sense the very nature, person and presence of God drawing us strongly in, moving us powerfully through and welcoming us up into our inheritance in the Son. Again, it is only when we stop at the form that idolatry meets and keeps us there. We must breathe much more deeply the life around us, not holding out till the next. As we do we will breathe out so much more of the life he has given us and thereby sound to the age to come the sound that says come.

In and through our work in the unseen orders of the creation we are called and privileged to find the justice and holiness of God in government; the beauty, suffering and playful delight of God in art, literature and leisure; the power and supply of God in business; the wisdom and knowledge of his Spirit in education; the wholeness of God in the wonder of our physical life and in the healing disciplines. This justice, this beauty, this wholeness and wisdom is found in the relationships we engage as we discover and uncover the attributes, nature and power of God (Rom. 1:20) in others. The eternal creator God, no longer safely removed by rationalism or mysticism from our life in creation, no longer hidden behind the thorns and the travail, is in this way made manifest and enjoyed in all things, through all things and over all things. We have the right to name, we have the call to occupy – we were made for this! Is it any wonder that God prepared all those good works before all time for us to walk in?

## **Good rewards**

This way of life, as you may well imagine, is very rewarding! The apostle Paul knew well what sowing into the spirit and reaping eternal life was all about. To the Galatians he described it this way: "Let us not lose heart in doing good, for in due season we shall reap if we don't grow weary. So then while we have opportunity, let us do good to all men and especially to those who are of the household of the faith."<sup>vii</sup> What are some of the signs that this reaping has begun? What does the abundant life Jesus promised look like when it arrives? The effects of restoring and filling a sphere of the creation by going into the good are, to say the least, immense! To name a few...

The earth begins to release to you your reward. This is now possible because your good work has resonated with, joined you to and drawn out the attributes, nature and power of God in the all things of creation. You begin to draw from the

depths of the many wells within creation. Here you enter in to the blessing of Abraham, blessed in the field and blessed in the home. In relationship with others, growing in stature and maturity, your heart is able to progressively attract and encompass more of the inheritance. That multiplication factor in God, which ensures that to him who has, more will be given, comes on line to accelerate your occupation of the heavens.

As you live you declare and establish the wisdom of God in the creation spheres right through into the heavenly places. Through the deeds of light you reprove and expose the deception and darkness of the present world system. Your good works shine that great light Jesus spoke about, thus enabling fallen man living in darkness to see how life and work were made to be by a good God. Even in the suffering and the travail of life they see the compassion of God resonating from your life to sound the healing, declare the forgiveness and proclaim the salvation. They now know that God is good, that the creation was never meant to be defined by the father of lies and used to deceive, destroy and steal. They can see that God made all things good, created them rich, declared them powerful, wanted them full of life and filled them with divine abundance. Here through good work your "quiet life in all godliness" begins to arrive on the street.

By occupying through good work you have shone such light that the invisible God can now be seen and "understood by that which is made". The Kingdom now begins to make sense to people because they see it in your life, your relationships and your work. The lost cannot see God in the abstract and the conceptual; even when you are saved you have a hard enough time doing so! God begins to be seen and he is the God of the earth, the God of family and marriage, the God of reality and work. The light is now shining strongly in a dark place and those in the land of the shadow of death are drawing close to its brightness. As you grow in this relationship with others you increasingly occupy the unseen spheres of creation. In the restoration that comes with this occupation the age to come draws closer. Heaven within your reach, glory called forth, ready to complete what has been substantially restored. The fullness of the stature of the man Christ Jesus now belongs to the body standing strong in marriage, family and work. Soon his prepared heaven will emerge from within everything and through everything to become the eternal crown over everything.

So, if you still think your job or work is outside of the purposes of God, or if you consider your work as mostly a place to practice virtue and earn money, then I strongly urge you to think again!

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<sup>i</sup> Dorothy L. Sayers, *Creed or Chaos?* Harcourt & Brace, 1949, p. 56

<sup>ii</sup> Psalm 24:1 (KJB)

<sup>iii</sup> Rom. 8:21

<sup>iv</sup> 2 Tim. 3:17

<sup>v</sup> Matt. 5:16

<sup>vi</sup> Col. 3:23, 24

<sup>vii</sup> Gal. 6:9, 10