

Devoted Living: Work as Worship

In this article, Peter Heslam introduces the notion of ‘work as worship’. This is the theme of the Faith in Business Leadership Retreat, which will take place from 5 to 7 April 2019, at Westminster College Cambridge.

Pressure can be divisive in more ways than one. It can make us fractious in our relationships and it can lure us into separating our working lives from our worshipping lives. Faced with competing loyalties, we end up confining worship to Sundays, dedicating the rest of our time to work.

Therein lies the path to disintegration, diminished purpose, half-heartedness, stress, and burnout.

Surely we are called to something better. But where can we catch a vision for it? And what practical difference would it make? Can anyone demonstrate to us a wholeness of being and doing that will help us shape our workplaces, churches, companies, leisure activities, families, and relationships?

Happily, my work suggests that there are many examples of such wholeness amongst today’s business leaders. The scores we’ve surveyed around the world provide evidence that human beings flourish and lead fruitful lives when they adopt a simple but profound truth: their whole lives matter to God.

Christians often assert that, for someone to come to Christ, they need to dedicate the whole of their lives to God. But in doing so, they usually mean in a linear fashion, understood in terms of time, measured in days and years. However, if we complement the idea of the *length* of our days with the notion of the *breadth* of our days, the phrase ‘the whole of life for Christ’ takes on

a much fuller meaning. Suddenly we see that every aspect of our days – not just the number of our days (our life-span) is to be set aside for God.

It follows that each dimension of our lives can constitute worship. Even the most mundane of our tasks can express devotion to God. Work as worship is about devotional – or devoted – living.

This truth cannot be fully grasped at the mere intellectual level. It involves not just our minds but our wills and emotions. That is the implication of what Jesus singles out as the greatest commandment – to love God ‘with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your strength’. The transformation of hearts, not just minds, is one reason why heart-felt gathered worship is indispensable to living out the full gospel during the working week, when most Christians are dispersed. Such worship facilitates work as worship, in part because it has a deep character-forming role.

This truth is lost on secular attempts to promote business ethics. It is also lost on all those who allow work *to take the place of* worship. Business leaders are amongst those who appear to have fallen into this trap. Amongst them is Carlos Ghosn, widely admired as one of the world’s greatest business leaders.

Until recently, that is. Having risen to the top of the three giant car companies Nissan, Renault and Mitsubishi, he faces criminal prosecution for under-reporting his earnings and for making personal use of company assets. Whatever the truth of these allegations, Carlos was so results-driven he had acquired the name ‘Seven-Eleven’ – he refused to take time off. For *Forbes* magazine, he was ‘the hardest-working man in the brutally competitive global car business’. His rise and fall raises red flags about the

dangers involved when a person allows work so to dominate their lives that they subsume ‘being’ under ‘doing’. Their work then starts to become an *object* of worship.

The Hebrew bible offers a radically different perspective – that work can become a legitimate *means* of worship. Words matter, and the words translated ‘work’ and ‘worship’ derive from the same root word (*abad* or *avodah*).

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The word first occurs in Genesis, immediately after God creates human beings. He then puts them to work. That is not an obvious part of the plot. After all, if God created everything ‘good’, what needed doing? Even if there were some odd jobs lying around, getting human beings to do them would be like getting Mr Bean to make a meal.



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Carlos Ghosn

Photo: The National, UAE

But if words matter, perhaps we should not confuse 'good' with 'complete' or 'perfect'. Human beings are commissioned to work on things that are good but need to be developed towards perfection. This work goes beyond dealing with hazards like weeds and parasites, as the commission precedes the fall.

Here we can be helped by another Hebrew word: *tipharah*, translated 'glory'. The Hebrew bible repeatedly suggests that the earth is filled with God's glory, and that human beings are created with that glory as their purpose. In English, glory is generally associated with admiration, fame, prestige, pride and kudos. But in Hebrew, the word is closely associated with beauty, majesty and weight. Human beings, in other

words, are to bring out more of the beauty that is inherent in creation.

This is happening in workplaces around the world. Mathematicians perceive patterns in numbers and devise elegant equations. Engineers and architects use those equations to design splendid bridges and buildings. Musicians hear sounds and rhythms and create breath-taking symphonies; artists see lines and shades and colours and produce magnificent paintings; accountants record income and expenses that encourage excellent housekeeping; entrepreneurs respond to problems by launching marvellous new products and services.

All work will embody aspects of the fall. Work can be draining, dirty, and

dangerous. But in so far as it draws out the inherent goodness and beauty of created things, it can also be an agent of worship.

Such worship can even be 'spirit-filled'. Bezalel and Oholiab are not well-known Hebrew heroes. But God says of Bezalel: 'I have filled him with the Spirit of God...with all kinds of skills - to make artistic designs for work in gold, silver and bronze...and to engage in all kinds of crafts' (Exodus 31.3-5).

Work can be worship because work can glorify God. Should we allow work any other role, the fall of the world's greatest captain of industry stands as a warning.

Words matter. When acted on, they shape the world.  



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