

Why Work?

Phil Jump challenges the Mayfield report which considers work in terms of its value for health and economic purposes, whereas St. Paul in his letter to the Ephesians considers our daily work to have value in itself for 'attaining to the whole measure of the fulness of God' and 'equipping God's people for works of service'.

I've heard and read a great deal in recent years about what is often framed as 'five-fold' ministry. The idea is derived from the New Testament book of Ephesians 4:11-13 where the writer, Paul, outlines five offices (apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers) that he perceives to be of significance in the life of the church community. Applications of this text vary from insisting that anyone who aspires to Christian leadership should be identified by at least one of them, to the idea that demonstrating all five is a sign of qualification for ordained ministry. There is even some debate about whether it should more accurately be defined as 'four-fold', built around the assumption that Paul's inclusion of 'pastors and teachers' should be understood as the double-barrelled labelling of a single role. (New Testament Greek is not renowned for its clarity of punctuation.)

I must admit that I sense this preoccupation has as much to do with the advent of PowerPoint, with its need for sequential presentation, as the original intent of the writer. But it does seem that any attempt to over-concentrate on these as positions in their own right somewhat misses their original intent. Paul's concern throughout this epistle is the discipleship and lifestyle of the entire Christian community, and it seems that this catalogue of entirely worthy ministries is little more than a passing reference to illustrate the

purpose and impact of Christian Leadership in general. Paul has already penned a profound prayer in the previous chapter that in fostering an ever-deeper appreciation of the love of God, his readers might be 'filled to the measure of the fulness of God' (Eph 3:19).

It is this prayer that resurfaces again in chapter 4 as he perceives these entirely honourable Christian offices as playing a vital role in achieving a purpose which culminates in 'attaining to the whole measure of the fulness of God'. It is hard to argue that Paul's concern is not so much the titles and designations that leaders hold, as the outcome that their endeavours achieve.

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I have no doubt that this debate will continue but what, you might justifiably ask, does any of this have to do with the issue of faith and work? I was prompted to write this piece by the Government's recent publication of Sir Charlie Mayfield's report *Keep Britain Working*.¹ In it he warns of a 'quiet but urgent crisis' which he qualifies as one of 'economic inactivity'.

My interest in this publication was initially aroused by the way it was presented in mainstream media as being concerned with the relationship between work and physical and mental wellbeing. Although couched in terms of a potential crisis, it spawned serious discussion about the positive impact of work, and the importance of an

approach to employment that takes a holistic view of human identity. These are themes that have been well-rehearsed by those who seek to develop a view of work from a faith-based perspective.

Yet for all these positives, the one thing that seemed to be absent was any focus on the work that people actually do. Sure, there need to be pathways in our work that make the journey easier for those facing challenges and yes, we need workplace environments that recognise and accommodate human needs and identity. But it seems according to the report that the reason for this is not so that things get made and necessary tasks completed, but because being engaged in work will make us better people and help grow our nation's floundering economy. Work itself seems in this report to remain a means to an end, taking second place to our agendas of personal wellbeing and economic growth.

And it's this that brings me back to Paul's letter to the Ephesians. As I said earlier there was, in the Apostle's mind, a purpose to Christian leadership however it is framed. And the growth towards fulness of which I wrote earlier is achieved by "equipping God's people for works of service" (Eph 4:12). I must confess that like many others, my instinctive response is to imagine those "works of service" to be the tasks and responsibilities that fill our church rotas and volunteer bulletins – those Christian acts of kindness and goodwill with which faithful disciples are supposed to fill their spare time.

'For the sake of the work they will do, not simply the benefits it might generate'

Photo: housekeep.com



Yet while there is no reason to exclude or demean such endeavours, surely one of the key dynamics of this New Testament epistle is to apply the profound truths of the Gospel to everyday life. In Ephesians 5:21–6:9 Paul goes on to consider how Christian discipleship impacts marriage relationships, family life and yes, the world of work. We might well feel unease at the way he leaves institutional slavery unchallenged, but this should not detract from the way that his scope includes the world of work. So is there any reason not to assume that the “works of service” for which effective leadership should equip us, have a similar breath of application?

While agreeing with much of it, where I take issue with Mayfield’s

report, or at least the narratives that have emerged around it in mainstream media, is that while we do need to focus on the experience of work for those who currently struggle – surely we need to do this for the sake of the work they will do, not simply the benefits it might generate. What Paul argues here is that the engagement itself, the “works of service” for which we are equipped, enable us into a fuller relationship with our Creator.

Paul is not blind to the economic and social value of work; he makes blunt reference to that in other of his writings. But he also believes that through work, when equipped and framed in the right way, we are matured to the measure of Christ. That is some claim and needs more

consideration than there is scope to offer here. But the contribution that this might make in the present debate is to press for an understanding of work that extends beyond human interest and economic growth.

So we might welcome this latest national debate, sparked by Mayfield’s report, as a valuable opportunity not only to explore the purpose of work but also the purpose of Christian leadership. Perhaps we should strive for a leadership that is not so much defined by the titles we borrow from Scripture as the degree to which it enables us to grow more into the measure of Christ through the work we do each day, wherever it is found. That involves every disciple making use of their various gifts which are used in building up the whole. 🙏

1. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/keep-britain-working-review-final-report/keep-britain-working-final-report>.



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