

Some Thoughts On Preaching About Work

C. Benton Kline

Columbia Theological Seminary, Decatur, Georgia

Introduction

“Preaching About Work” is an appropriate theme for the season of Pentecost because the civic calendar in the U.S. always includes in this church season the first Monday in September as Labor Day. Or perhaps because this part of the church year is also sometimes called “ordinary time,” time which falls between Pentecost and Advent,¹ and because work is an “ordinary” activity, it is appropriate to think about work as a theme of preaching in this season. Actually I believe that work, like stewardship, is a continuing theme, one which should never be forgotten in preaching. In the end, indeed, work is a prime dimension of our stewardship.

In the week in which I began to write this article I received three pieces of literature: a brochure for a conference at Kanuga, the Episcopal conference center in North Carolina, on “Connecting Sunday and Monday”; a clipping from a colleague of an article in the *New York Times Magazine*, “A Greed for Work”; and an article in the business section of the suburban newspaper with the heading, “Workers find ways to justify time.”² The conference is to be about exploring the ethics of American corporate and public life, addressing “issues facing career-minded Christians . . . for business persons of conscience.” The *New York Times* article’s subtitle is “In ’59, leisure—not the job—seemed to be the wave of the future. In ’88, work is the opiate of the ruling class.” The local newspaper article concludes with a statement by Arthur Witkin, a personnel psychologist from New York: “We have a whole new generation who are ambivalent about work. . . . While the country was founded on a Puritan ethic and a pioneer ethic—which meant work, work, work—we’ve gone beyond that. We have overprivileged generations.”

One further preliminary observation. I have just finished teaching for the third time a seminar, *The Theology of Work*. And once again I have had confirmed that the preoccupation with work (no pun intended!) is central both to the ministry that the church carries on and to the ministers struggling with their own life and work. In the development of that seminar over the last few years, I have come to some convictions about ways to approach work theologically and thus how preaching on work may be done with integrity and relevance. That is what I want to share.

What Is Work?

One begins by reflecting on what we mean when we talk about work. Our

most common inclination is to think of work as what you are paid to do—that is, we equate work with employment, and especially with compensated employment. Then we talk about “the world of work” we mean the world where people have jobs and do them and make money. But that view of work has some problems and causes us to reflect on some issues.

What about homemakers and child-rearers? Are they not working even though they may not be in the employment stream? We are reminded about this anomaly when we read periodically the calculations of the value of the work of the homemaker if she (and it is generally women that are referred to) were to be compensated for the time and effort expended. So we cannot adequately define work by jobs.

What about the activities of leisure? Are not some of them work? If I paint my house or remodel my kitchen—as an “amateur”—in my leisure time—is that not work or am I not working? What I do would be called work by the painter or the carpenter. Winston Churchill painted for relaxation, Jamie Wyeth for his livelihood. Is one working and the other not? My neighbor gardens in his leisure, my uncle farmed for a living. In hoeing corn work for one and not the other? So we cannot even adequately define work in distinction from leisure.

And what about those who have retired. My father-in-law took early retirement at the age of fifty-seven, and for fifteen more years he repaired ward furnishings and windows and doors at Scottish Rite Hospital, built furnishings for Decatur Presbyterian Church, and packed and shipped to Korea all the equipment for the Topple Hospital—all without pay—all as retired—but surely he was working.

In the church we should be especially aware of this. Does the minister work and the elders not work when they are at session meeting? Does the choir director work more than the members of the choir? Do we not speak of church *work* especially when we refer to what volunteers do?

Perhaps then we must rethink how to define work. One writer summarizes a survey of various definitions by suggesting five criteria that commonly appear in definitions: work (1) is purposeful activity; (2) is instrumental; (3) yields income; (4) entails expenditure of effort; (5) has some element of obligation and/or constraint.³ Purposeful activity, yes; instrumental, that is, for some end outside itself, generally yes; yields income, no, based on what we have observed; expenditure of effort, yes, at the most basic level; involves obligation and/or constraint, often perhaps, but not always, for there is work freely undertaken for the sheer joy of it.

There is another set of distinctions which is of great help in thinking through the nature of work, the distinctions of *labor*, *work*, and *action* made by Hannah Arendt in *The Human Condition*.⁴

Labor is the name for what we do simply to support life and its continuance. We labor to provide the necessities of life—food, clothing, shelter—and to keep our life going. Much of “housework” is labor. For many people what they do in their daily working activity is simply labor—either because it is so routine or because it is done primarily to get enough to sustain life. Labor produces for consumption. Labor never ends. Labor’s product is all used

up—whether that is food cooked or clothes washed or floors scrubbed or letters typed or tires changed or fields plowed or—dare we think it?—one more order of service and sermon prepared for the insatiable appetite of the congregation. And especially when labor's product is symbolized for us by the paycheck, we are aware that it is indeed consumed and has to be produced the next week or the next month.

Work is Arendt's term for the activity that produces things that can be used, products that have a kind of permanence and standing. Work is done with a sense of purpose. Indeed one has an end in view, an outcome to be attained, a "piece of work" to actually bring into being. Work has a beginning and an end. One can get satisfaction from seeing it through from beginning to end. Work is the activity of making a table or a dress, of building a house, of baking a cake, of writing a computer program or a poem or—even for us—a sermon or a prayer.

Action is Arendt's term for the activity of human communication and decision making. I think one could just as well call it "trans-action" or "inter-action." Her model is the process of politics in Greek society, but I suspect that we have better models in our understanding of human relationship. Trans-action is the process of communicating with another. It has a beginning—that is clear—as one reaches out, but it has no end that one can anticipate and count on. One begins a process which is irreversible and unpredictable.

A corporate planner at the Coca Cola Company helped me see the relation of labor and work to trans-action when she told of drawing up a marketing plan. There was work there—a definite end to be accomplished—and there was labor—the sheer drudgery of assembling data—but there was, she said, the real accomplishment when she presented the plan to the decision-makers and they agreed to it, when some people accepted what she offered and moved to continue the process that she had initiated.

I believe that we, too, understand that what we call "the work of ministry" is in fact transaction more than work or labor. A sermon is more than just the labor of feeding a hungry congregation one more week and it is more than a piece of work, a product to be used or admired. A sermon starts a process—or so we hope—and is like a conversation that has a beginning and may go on and on.

But what about the people in the congregation? What have they been about? How much of their life is labor? How significant is their work? How much opportunity have they for trans-action?

What Has Happened in the World of Work?

In the modern age two transformations have occurred in the situation with regard to the arena of work.⁵ One is the process of industrialization, which has involved a revolutionary restructuring of the whole context of working. This restructuring has been marked externally on one hand by the division of labor, the breaking up of the process of work into separate tasks as on the assembly line or in a large office, and on the other hand by changes in the organization

of the workplace through the precise description of tasks and imposition of rules (bureaucratization) and the development of automation. Internally, in the life and person of the worker, the modern age has been marked by the separation of the person from the task. In many places in the work arena one no longer can indicate who one *is* by what one *does*, for what one does is fragmented, imposed, external. So one scrambles for status in job titles or more likely seeks whatever meaning is to be found in private life.

As a result of these changes Peter Berger distinguishes three levels of significance to working:

(1) working which gives identity and claims commitment, found mostly in the professions and in upper levels of management;

(2) working which is neither fulfilling nor oppressive but is endured for the sake of private life, the situation with most white collar and blue collar jobs today;

(3) working which is a direct threat to the integrity of the self either because of indignity or oppression, the situation with many unskilled or marginal jobs.

In the contemporary Western world, the first and third categories have shrunk and the second has greatly enlarged. Think of the way professions have become organized into large organizations (e.g., the law firm or the group medical practice) and the effect of buy-outs on executives. Consider also the development of "labor-saving" devices and machines to do the most unpleasant jobs. Most people would characterize their work activity as what they do in order to support their family or to have the wherewithal to enjoy life, but with little sense of personal fulfillment in the working.

The second transformation is in the understanding of the meaning of working, what Berger calls the "ideological transformation." At the beginning of the modern era working was seen as a religious duty (as with the Puritans) and then as an ethical demand (as with Benjamin Franklin). In more recent times this "calling" has been described in terms of personal identity giving purpose and meaning to life. But the structural changes in the arena of work have removed for most people the inherent sense of meaning in working, so that for them meaning is sought in the private arenas of life.

The result is *alienation* in the arena of work. There are many forms of alienation and many ways of describing it. One scholar has identified six dimensions of alienation in the workplace.⁶

Powerlessness—"I am a victim"

Meaninglessness—"I see no purpose"

Normlessness—"I have to do things I do not approve"

Value isolation—"I don't get recognition for what I do"

Self-estrangement—"I don't know who I am any more"

Social isolation—"I am cut off from other people"

In any congregation there are people who feel one or another of these forms of alienation about their arena of work. How does this alienation in the workplace affect the way in which we present the traditional teaching of the Church about vocation and calling and stewardship in the world of work?

There are many other dimensions of what has happened in the arena of

work that may enter into preaching on work. Space does not permit their development, but it may be helpful to name some of them. Connected closely with what we have described are the matters of work-satisfaction—what make a job or activity worthwhile; of motivation—the interest of the manager or boss in evoking good work; of work quality—the interest of the worker in the nature of the workplace, the sense of participation, the worthwhileness of the product. There are especially in our contemporary society the issues of mobility in work, both geographical mobility and status mobility on one hand and career change on the other. And in every congregation these days there are the concerns that come from the absence of work—unemployment, especially arising from reduction of the workforce, and retirement, “normal” (whatever that now is considered to be) and “early” (often forced but sometimes chosen).

To think of preaching on work means also to consider the whole matter of leisure and how it is valued and used. I have been pondering recently a triad like Arendt’s triad of labor, work, and trans-action. This one is idleness, rest, and leisure. One of our problems is that we know that idleness is “evil” not only because the Bible tells us so, but also because idleness is the counterpart of labor and to be idle is somehow not to be active in the sustaining of life. Rest is commended in Scripture, I think, as the signal of the completion of a particular work, but when we cannot see the end of our activity clearly any more, we are afraid to rest. Leisure is itself an activity, a different activity, and the classical understanding of leisure is that it affords the opportunity for trans-action. Yet we are aware that today leisure is often, as Berger indicates, private, and we are also aware that as an activity it is often as empty, as meaningless, or even as alienated as working.

Some Theological Issues And Insights

Now that we have explored some ways of understanding the world of work and some of the changes that have taken place and some of the issues with which people wrestle about their own work lives and about the significance of working, it is time to look at more strictly theological and biblical dimensions of this complex reality of working. What I offer here is no systematic exploration, but some suggestions and directions that may shape the approach to preaching about working—especially in the light of the insights about working that we have offered from the social and behavioral sciences and from some secular reflection.

If we turn to the Bible, we find several attitudes represented. One is the sense of work as toil—hard, unrelenting, even cursed. The key to this is in Genesis 3:17-19: “. . . cursed is the ground because of you; in toil shall you eat of it all the days of your life; thorns and thistles it shall bring forth to you; and you shall eat the plants of the field. In the sweat of your face you shall eat bread . . .” The contrast is with Genesis 2:15: “The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden to till it and keep it”—the human set to a task with no sense of toil or sweat or the hostility of the earth to the working of the one who tills and cultivates it. This negative sense, expressed so well in the term *toil* occurs again and again in Scripture, in the words used, in the sense of the

fruitlessness of much of human labor, and in the quest for rest from toil (Ps. 90:10; Eccles.1:3, 2:11, 18-23, 3:9, 5:15-17; cf. Gen.3:17 ff.). Jesus shows a sense of the hardship of toil and labor (cf., e.g., Matt. 11:28 and parallels), and Paul consistently uses the term which indicates the harshness of toil and counts labor as part of his sufferings (cf. I Cor. 4:12, II Cor. 6:5, 11:23, 27).

A second biblical theme about working is that it is a positive blessing, as in Psalm 128: 1,2: "Blessed is every one who fears the Lord, who walks in his ways! You shall eat the fruit of the labor of your hands; you shall be happy, and it shall be well with you." So Israel entering the land of promise is called to a life of cultivating the land and a sense of blessing. That goodness of working is connected with obedience to God and to the fulfilling of God's purpose, which includes the working activity of God's faithful people. In the New Testament, the positive valuation of working is connected more with the doing of the work of the Lord than with daily work, although daily tasks are to be fulfilled (cf. John 5:17, 9:4, Acts 20:18 ff., I Cor. 9, Eph. 4:28, Col. 3:23 f., I Thess. 4:9 ff., II Thess. 3:6-13).

Yet a third theme about working in the Bible is that it is just a normal daily activity, which is taken for granted. But that it is so seen is itself a kind of dignifying of work. In the Old Testament people go about their daily tasks and sometimes these are of benefit to the special people noted in the stories and sometimes they are not (cf. incidents in the life of David, of Elijah, and Elisha). Jesus dealt with people who were engaged in many work activities, some of whom he called away from that working to a new activity as his followers. Jesus also used the daily activities of working life in his teaching, especially in his parables.⁷

One may get a better understanding of the biblical teaching if one leaves this traditional blessing/curse model to which I have added the category of "ordinary working." It seems to me that to take seriously the distinctions of labor, work, and trans-action would lead to an interesting way of looking at biblical materials, especially for preaching. Then one might see the connection of toil in the Bible with the category, *labor*, which is both a good activity as the means of supporting life—of one's self and of those for whom one has responsibility—and at the same time a painful and drudgery-like activity because one labors as one who is at cross-purposes with God (cf. Gen. 2:15 and Gen. 3:17-19 already noted above). And one might see that there is in the biblical world and teaching much of the character of the category, *work*, the purposeful activity directed to a clear end, sometimes with a real sense of accomplishment as one works with God and sometimes with outcomes that are rejected because they are not in accord with God's working (cf. Ps. 127:1 "Unless the Lord builds the house, those who build it labor in vain."). But most helpfully one could see how the category, *trans-action*, is explanatory of the working of Jesus the servant and of the service to which those who follow Jesus are called (cf. Phil. 2:12b, 13 " . . . work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for God is at work in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.").

A key biblical idea about working comes from the terms *calling* or *vocation*. In the early church the sense of these terms is most often related to calling to salvation, and they are connected with the term *election*. In this sense

they have little to do with the daily work activity of the people.⁸ By the Middle Ages, the terms *calling* and *vocation* are tied to working but were largely limited to the persons entering upon a "religious" occupation. The terms had become "clericalized," as they are often by church professionals still today. It is well known that Martin Luther, determined in the Reformation to overcome the clericalism of the church, centered on the I Corinthians 7 passage and translated *vocatio* as *Beruf*, which was understood as what one does each day. So for Luther one's daily working is one's calling. John Calvin, aware more than Luther was of the urbanization of life and of the mobility of people, developed a more subtle treatment. One's *calling* is first of all one's relation to God, one's election by God's gracious action. That calling and election is then worked out in one's occupation or daily working.⁹

Karl Barth develops Calvin's understanding in an interesting way. He wants to hold the notion of *calling* for God's election of "a people," but he then develops the role of "gifts" for *each* person. One's daily working activity is related then to one's vocation as a Christian and most especially to the particular gifts and circumstances of one's life within which one fulfills that vocation in faithful obedience.¹⁰ It is interesting to reflect further then on how one's particular faithfulness relates to labor—the sustaining of life for one's self and those for whom one has responsibility; to work—the achievement of useful goals and ends in one's setting; and to trans-action—to the relationships and adventures of interpersonal and communal activities.

Further exploration of the arena of work leads to a whole range of issues, for which space and time allow only a brief mention, but which may suggest some directions for preaching. One theological issue is whether work is to be understood in terms of (1) a discipline laid upon us or (2) a spontaneous creativity to which we are invited. If working is a kind of discipline, then is it to be understood as a way God has of controlling our lives and of curbing our desires, or as the outworking of the transformation of work by the fall of Adam and Eve, that is as a kind of corrective penal consequence of sin? Or is work to be seen as a form of the gracious discipline of the Christian life, that is, as an expression of sanctification? If working is a form of spontaneous creativity, then is it to be understood as our being co-creators with God, as Pope John Paul II suggests in his encyclical on work, *Laborem Exercens*, or as Dorothee Soelle characterizes it as the natural creativity that continues God's creative activity and even completes it?¹¹ Or is our working to be understood not to continue or extend God's creative activity but to correspond to it as the self-expression of redeemed or liberated people?

Another issue is the extent to which our working is appropriately understood as a means of self-expression as voiced by Abraham Maslow: "I think I am most happy, and most fulfilled, and most myself, and most being as if that is what I were meant to be when I am involved in my work."¹² Or is working more to be understood in terms of social responsibility as William Temple once put it, using the negative situation of unemployment: "The greatest evil and bitterest injury of unemployment is not the animal grievance of hunger and discomfort, not even the mental grievance of vacuity and boredom; it is the spiritual grievance of being allowed no opportunity of contributing to the

general life and welfare of the community.”¹³

Closely connected with this duality is another. To what extent on one hand is working really to be understood as a matter of *individual fulfillment* and as an *end in itself*? Do we work mainly for the sake of the work and our sense of accomplishment in it? Or on the other hand are we more in touch with reality and with the Christian understanding when we focus on the *instrumental* character of work and upon *social reality*? Do we work out of a concern for the social significance of our working, both in terms of how our working benefits those for whom we are directly responsible and in terms of the way in which we contribute through our working to the well-being of the world and to the fulfillment of God’s purposes?

Similar questions can be asked about the whole matter of alienation in working. Is alienation simply a matter of the structure of the working situation for the individual, as we have tended to describe it above, or is alienation also, and even more importantly in these times, a matter of the meaning and outcome of the work for society? Put concretely, one must ask not only about the conditions in the factory or the office or the shop, for instance, but also about what the factory makes, what the office directs, what the shop sells. And then one must ask whether the overcoming of alienation has to do only with modifying or restructuring the workplace and the conditions for the individual worker, or whether the overcoming of alienation involves a far more difficult and more systemic concern for the whole character of the working and of the outcome of the working.

To preach about work today is to address the complex and changing, satisfying and frustrating reality of working for people today and to address it with realism and sensitivity. One is not likely to find in the lectionary or in one’s own biblical exploration many specific texts that address directly the contemporary workplace. But one does discover in Scripture a remarkable awareness of the labor, work, and trans-action of human life. And even more importantly one is called by Scripture and our theological heritage to bring to bear the involvement of the Triune God in creating and governing and redeeming the world and what we humans do in our working in the world.

NOTES

¹ The Office of Worship for the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) . . . , *Daily Prayer: The Worship of God: Supplemental Liturgical Resource 5* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1987), pp. 25 f.

² Brochure, “Kanuga Conferences announces Connecting Sunday and Monday: Exploring the Ethics of American Corporate and Public Life, February 22-24, 1989.”

Laurence Shames, “A Greed for Work,” *New York Times Magazine*, 4 December 1988, p. 30.

“Shorting company on hours takes toll,” *Gwinnett Daily News*, 5 December 1988.

³ Sylvia Shimmin, “Concepts of Work,” *Occupational Psychology* 40 (1966): 195.

⁴ Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), pp. 79-247. Arendt’s discussion is long, complex, and directed to different ends than those of the preacher and the theologian. I am summarizing what I think are the relevant points, but a careful reading of her book is itself an intellectual adventure that may suggest some other directions.

⁵ In this section I am drawing heavily upon Peter Berger, “Some General Observations on the Problem of Work,” in *The Human Shape of Work*, ed. Peter Berger (South Bend, Indiana: Gateway Editions, Ltd., c1964), pp. 211-241.

⁶ Melvin Seeman, “Alienation and Engagement,” in *The Human Meaning of Social Change*,

ed. Angus Campbell and Philip E. Converse (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, c1972), pp. 467-527.

⁷ John C. Purdy, *Parables at Work* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1985) is a good study of the way Jesus uses work settings and activities in the parables. A similar treatment of the ordinariness of work is in Paul S. Minear, "Work and Vocation in Scripture" in *Work and Vocation: A Christian Discussion*, ed. John Oliver Nelson (New York, Harper & Brothers, 1954), pp. 32-81.

⁸ This history of the use of the terms is laid out briefly in Robert L. Calhoun, in "Work and Vocation in Christian History," in *Work and Vocation: A Christian Discussion*, ed. John Oliver Nelson (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1954), pp. 82-115. The term *vocation* is also discussed at length in Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, III/4, pp. 595 ff. In both places there are good bibliographical references. One should note that the one clear exception to this generalization about the early church comes in I Cor. 7:17-24.

⁹ *Institutes*, III.10.6 is the primary reference. See the footnote in John T. McNeill, ed., *Calvin: Institutes of the Christian Religion* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, c1960), p. 724. Cf. Ronald S. Wallace, *Calvin's Doctrine of the Christian Life* (Tyler, TX: Geneva Divinity School Press, 1982), pp. 130 f., 154-156, and W. Fred Graham, *The Constructive Revolutionary* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, c1971), pp. 80 ff.

¹⁰ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, III/4, pp. 603-647.

¹¹ *Laborem Exercens*: Encyclical Letter of Pope John Paul II (1981) in Gregory Baum, *The Priority of Labor* (New York, Paulist Press, c1982), pp. 93-152.

Dorothee Soelle with Shirley A. Cloyes, *To Work and To Love* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, c1984), pp. 76 ff.

¹² W. B. Frick, *Humanistic Psychology: Interviews with Maslow, Murphy, and Rogers* (New York: Merrill, 1971), p. 31. Quoted in Peter Warr and Toby Wall, *Work and Well-Being* (Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1978), p. 10.

¹³ I am unable to locate the source of this quotation.