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Our daily work: God's idea

The church of my childhood encouraged a weekly report of “Christian” activities. When first given this report sheet, I surveyed the suggested activities in dismay. Virtually everything on the list was beyond my young capabilities. But amid Bible studies, giving out Christian literature, and so forth, I found “persons helped.” Yes, I could manage that. I totaled up what I thought had been helpful contributions to my parents, siblings, school-mates, teachers, and so forth and wrote “20” in the designated box. The youth leader was highly amused and even took the matter to my parents, who were embarrassed. How could anyone of my tender preteen age help 20 people? I tried to explain—but to no avail. What was wanted was *real* “Christian” activity.

Others have noted the same problem. Francis Ayres said, “The layman remains a second-class citizen, an assistant to the clergy, primarily a maintenance man in the institutionalized church.”¹ William Diehl, a member of the Lutheran Church that first recognized the ministry of all believers, wrote, “When it comes down to reality, my church sees lay ministry purely in terms of service to the institutional church.”² Is this biblical? Let’s review different examples, especially in the book of Genesis, for the answer.

God invented work

Significantly, work—none other than the work of God—begins Jewish and Christian Scripture.

The work of humanity is introduced in the Garden of Eden when Adam and Eve are given the task of caring for the garden (Gen. 2:15). The Hebrew words used, *abad* and *shamar*, are the same as those used to describe the Levites’ work in the tabernacle (Num. 3:7, 8; 18:7).

Claus Westermann noted this focus on work in Genesis³ and considered that human achievement is not only a significant theme in the primeval story but also one to which hardly any attention has been given.⁴ Even more significantly, Ian Hart suggests the focus on work in the prologue of Genesis (Gen. 1:1–2:3) suggests that work is a theme for the entire book.⁵

A Genesis solution

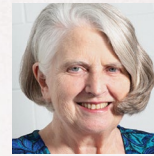
The Genesis narrative that introduces the concept of human work offers a simple solution to the value of ordinary human work.

Human work appears fairly negatively in chapters 4–11 in the Genesis narrative. The primordial narrative reaches what Gerhard von Rad called its capstone⁶ in the Tower of Babel pericope. This pericope is regarded by many as very carefully crafted.⁷ This widespread agreement regarding its care of construction and literary placement suggests that the author of Genesis took trouble with it because he meant it to be both noted and noteworthy.

The positioning of the tower narrative suggests that the author considered it vitally important to understand the issues that led to the call of



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SCAN FOR AUDIO

Abram. There is much about the tower builders and their intentions that appears laudable to modern thinking: they were cooperative, industrious, inventive, and ambitious, to name just a few of their apparently commendable characteristics. However, what is most clearly described in the tower narrative is not their worship, or even their attitudes, but their work. They fit the description Habakkuk penned later: “guilty men, whose own might is their god!” (Hab. 1:11b, ESV). Perhaps it is because of this negative portrayal of work in the early parts of Genesis that the importance of ordinary human work has been denigrated.

But most of Genesis tells a different story. After the tower narrative, the author rapidly focuses on the call of Abram (Gen. 12:1–3). Bruce Waltke asserted that this famous call is the thematic center of the Pentateuch.⁸ Abram’s call states: “Now the LORD had said to Abram,

‘Get out from your country,
From your family
And from your father’s house,
To a land that I will show you.
And I will make you a great nation;
I will bless you
And make your name great;
And you shall be a blessing.
I will bless those who bless you,
And curse him who curses you;
And in you all the families of the earth shall be
blessed.’” (Gen. 12:1–3, NKJV).

God repeatedly promises to bless Abram, emphasizing that blessing comes from God. But that blessing depends on separating from the surrounding social norms. Significantly, Abram is also called to be a blessing. Laurence Turner highlights the importance of this by observing that the Hebrew of “you will be a blessing” is actually in the form of a command, not a promise.⁹

Jonathan Bernis, a Messianic Jew, sees the Genesis 12:1–3 promise and command that Abraham was to bless “all the families of the earth” as twofold. First is the blessing Jewish people have brought to the world through their contributions in medicine, science, literature, and culture which, of course, has been achieved through their work. Second and more important, the Messiah, the Savior of the world, would come through the Jews.¹⁰

What is the perspective of the Genesis author regarding Abraham and his descendants being blessed and a blessing to all the families of the earth? “Blessing,” Hebrew *brk*, appears in Genesis 88 times, more than any other book in the Old Testament,¹¹ beginning with God blessing Creation and the Sabbath. Christopher Wright Mitchell made a detailed study of the meaning of *brk* and concluded: “The factor that makes a blessing a blessing is the relationship between God and the person blessed. . . . The type of benefit God actually bestows when he blesses is of secondary importance.”¹² Mitchell notes that “God’s blessing is a visible sign of his favor” and that other people



can say, “We have seen quite clearly that Yahweh is with you because God has blessed you (see Gen. 26:28; 39:2–6).”¹³

The patriarchal narratives illustrate how God not only blessed Abraham and his offspring, but also through their work, other families and nations were blessed. We note that Abraham and his descendants made many mistakes that were certainly no blessing to others, highlighting both the difficulty that all God’s people have in totally trusting His blessing power and a need for spiritual encouragement.

But Abraham was also noted to be a blessing to others. After his successful military work rescuing his nephew Lot and his Sodomite neighbors captured from the Vale of Siddim, Melchizedek met Abram and noted: “Blessed be Abram of God Most High, who has delivered your enemies into your hand” (Gen. 14:19, 20, NKJV). Years later, Abimelech, king of Gerar, requested a mutually beneficial peace treaty with Abraham because, he said, “God is with you in all that you do” (Gen. 21:22, 32, NKJV). In presenting the case for a bride for Isaac, Abraham’s servant noted, “The LORD has blessed my master greatly, and he has become great” (Gen. 24:35, NKJV).

The neighbors of Isaac asked for a covenant of peace, declaring, “We have certainly seen that the LORD is with you. . . . You are now the blessed of the LORD” (Gen. 26:1, 12, 13, 26–29). Laban admitted to Jacob, “I have learned by experience that the LORD has blessed me for your sake” (Gen. 30:27, NKJV). And the story of Joseph shows just how extensive can be the blessing shared through daily work. The narrative focuses on both the excellent quality of Joseph’s work and the fact that God was with him. Potiphar’s house was blessed for Joseph’s sake because the Lord was with him (Gen. 39:5, 2). When Joseph was in prison, God made his work prosper (v. 23). As he listened to Joseph’s wise advice, Pharaoh recognized Joseph had “the Spirit of God” (Gen. 41:38, NKJV), and he gave Joseph both a noble work and a name that probably means “God speaks, and He lives.”¹⁴ In his daily work, even the menial and demeaning work of a slave and a prisoner, yet also that of the prime minister, Joseph was a blessing to “all the families of the earth” as God intended His people to be.

Pastoral encouragement

If pastors acknowledge the blessing potential of their members’ daily work, they will better be able to work with and for them. They will

appreciate their community value and be able to offer them support and witnessing assistance.

You can help your members understand that accepting the “call of Abraham” to work in God’s plan for blessing will separate Christians from a self-seeking, Babel-working mindset. Acknowledging that the opportunity to bless others is in response to God’s blessing us transforms daily work. Many poorly esteemed jobs are transformed when it is recognized how much they bless society. Many jobs, such as those in the building and decorating trades, teaching and health professions, and many others, offer powerful witnessing opportunities. Regarding work simply as an opportunity for blessing removes anxiety about any eternally transforming function it may have.

What can you do to help your members realize their potential for sharing God’s love to others in word and action in their workplace? The worth of all work, paid or unpaid, can quickly be assessed by its quality of blessing, both now and eternally.



- 1 Francis O. Ayres, *The Ministry of the Laity* (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1962), 15.
- 2 William E. Diehl, *Christianity and Real Life* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1976), viii.
- 3 Claus Westermann, *Genesis 1-11: A Commentary*, trans., John J. Scullion, SJ (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Publishing House, 1984), 86.
- 4 Westermann, 18, 51.
- 5 Ian Hart, “Genesis 1:1-2:3 as a Prologue to the Book of Genesis,” *Tyndale Bulletin* 46, no. 2 (1995): 315–336.
- 6 Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis: A Commentary*, 2nd ed., The Old Testament Library (London, UK: SCM Press, 1961), 143.
- 7 See, for example, von Rad, 143; Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 1 (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1987), 234–238; U. Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Genesis, Part Two: From Noah to Abraham*, trans. Israel Abrahams (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1964), 226–234.
- 8 Bruce K. Waltke, *Genesis: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001), 208.
- 9 Laurence A. Turner, *Genesis* (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), 64.
- 10 Jonathan Bernis, *A Rabbi Looks at Jesus of Nazareth* (Bloomington, MN: Chosen Books, 2011), 72.
- 11 Christopher Wright Mitchell, *The Meaning of Brk “to Bless” in the Old Testament*, SBL Dissertation Series 95 (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1987), 185.
- 12 Mitchell, 165.
- 13 Mitchell, 166.
- 14 Jon L. Dybdahl, ed., *Andrews Study Bible* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 2010), Gen. 41:45, margin.