

Study 3: Work, leisure and rest.

Key idea:

When we consider that God has made us to work, worship and enjoy leisure and rest, there is almost a theological imperative that they not be in conflict. This fits with the idea that they are integral to our wholeness. Each is an opportunity for good, and for us to do good. A wise use of time fits in here, but not legalistically. We should seek to work, and rest and play with the subjective sense that we are being who God wants us to be, and the objective corrective that neither work, nor rest nor leisure need be self-indulgent.

1. Do you ever feel your life is out of balance? How?
2. What might a balanced life look like? What Christian values underpin your view of a balanced life? [For example, love, peace, contentment]
3. Do you think a 'balanced life' is a goal within the Christian life? Why? What Bible passages support your view? [Genesis 1: God worked and then rested. Jesus proclaimed the Kingdom of God, but seemed to enjoy long times of prayer, and eating with friends (as well as strangers). Paul seems to have had many close friends: Romans 16.]
4. How can we distinguish 'work' from 'leisure' and 'rest'? Miroslav Volf defines work as, 'honest, purposeful, and methodologically specified social activity whose primary goal is the creation of products or states of affairs that can satisfy the needs of working individuals or their co-creatures'. Is there more to it than this? [Darrell Cosden sees work as having eternal consequences and eternal value, as it both shapes us and our world. While both we and the world will be remade when Christ returns, our uniqueness, the 'who we were intended to be and the people we are becoming in Christ', will continue. Work then is an occasion for grace, for humble obedience, and an act of worship. Leisure can be seen as 'not work', but, more positively, it is an end in itself. 'Leisure is freedom, opportunity and possibility. In Calvinist terms, it is the mandate to extend the Lordship, in terms of freedom in Christ, to everything'.]
5. Is it better to talk of a 'work/life balance' or a 'work/rest of life balance'? What do we lose if we talk only of a 'work/life balance'? [We devalue the God-giveness of work, and his purposes for it.]

6. Where does 'fun' fit in your life? [Some people find work is fun. Others find most fun outside work. Try to find out what people really like doing. You may like to explore the ways that God seems to have fun.]
7. Are we slaves to counting time? How might our knowledge that our lives are eternal affect the way we think about time? [One view of eternal life is that we cease to use time to measure our enjoyment of God and his recreation. 'Eternal' is qualitative more so than quantitative. Perhaps the way to put together the theologies of work and leisure is to think of them together rather than as opposites, and not use time to keep them apart.]
8. Do you think leisure is a means to an end (e.g. recovery so we can work better) or an end in itself? Why? [I am not using 'end' here in the sense of 'ultimate end', as everything we do should glorify God. Rather, assuming that our choices of leisure activities are pleasing to God, can we just enjoy our leisure, or should it have another purpose. I think it's an end in itself!]
9. What do you think of the Sabbath rest? How hard do you try to have a day of rest each week? [We need to avoid being legalistic about this. Sometimes we have to work on our 'rest' day, because other people need us.]
10. Do you think that the 'laziness of sloth' has given way to the 'laziness of busyness', where we have become too busy to love, and rest and simply be as God made us to be? What can we do to fight the idolatry of busyness?
11. How might your life be different if you stopped seeing work and leisure as opposites, but two essential parts of the way God has made us?

End of Study

Study Notes: Some further reflections

The task of these notes is to draw on what the Bible has to say about work, leisure, play, and rest, and what Barth, Volf, Moltmann, Cosden, Oswalt and others have written on the theologies of work, leisure and rest, and piece together a workable picture of the life God wants us to live before Christ returns. The catalyst has been reflecting on the dangers of workaholicism, and yet the sense that work is very important in the God-giveness of human life. Work preceded the fall, and will be part of the new heavens and earth. However, where does it fit into the current eschatological age? The main

focus of these notes will be on the theologies of work and leisure, and how we may fit them together to form a life worth living.¹

We are made to work. God is a worker. He created and sustains the heavens and the earth (Genesis 1, Ps 104). Not only are we made as workers in his image (Genesis 1:27), but our task as co-workers is spelt out in Genesis 1:28. We are made to serve (Colossians 3:23-24), and are reminded that, 'anyone unwilling to work should not eat' (2 Thessalonians 3:10-13). Yet we are not hard wired for workaholism.² In theological terms, work is not an end in itself (Col 3:17, Rom 14:6). The glory of God is the ultimate end.

So, work is important, but how important? Despite God resting on the seventh day and enjoying his creation (Genesis 2:1-3), Christians have at times struggled to see how rest and leisure relate to work. Luther thought that, 'Man was created not for leisure but for work, even in the state of innocence'.³ Work and leisure have been seen as opposites.⁴ Leisure is said to be what we do when we don't work.⁵ Theologians who consider the theology of work recognise that rest forms part of the created order, and there is more to the Sabbath rest than command. There is an ethical dimension.⁶ Leisure allows us to see that, 'life is a gift as well as a task'.⁷ As Barth argues, 'The aim of the Sabbath commandment is that man (and woman) give and allow the omnipotent grace of God to have the first and last word at every point'.⁸ The place of festivals in the life of Israel should not be seen as a point of discontinuity, now that we no longer need the 'Law' where they were prescribed, but a point of continuity with our God-given need for fun and play. Hospitality is undoubtedly a significant aspect of Christian life, and enjoyment

¹ It is recognised that 'leisure', 'play' and 'rest' overlap but are not synonyms. There is no space here to explore the implications of this. While definitions of 'work' and 'leisure' are discussed below, definitions of 'play' and 'rest' will not be considered. But see Robert K. Johnston, 'Work and Play: A Biblical Perspective', pp. 7-16 in *Christianity and Leisure: Issues in a Pluralistic Society*, (eds. Paul Heintzman, Glen E. Van Andel and Thomas L. Visker, Toronto: Dordt Press, 1994).

² Ken Costa, *God at Work: Living every day with purpose*, (London: Continuum, 2007), 111. The term 'workaholism' was coined by W.E. Oates in 1968 to identify a psychological obsession, or an addiction, to work. its meaning has shifted from a pathology to almost a compliment or boast: Christopher Clausen, 'Against Work', *American Scholar*. Autumn 2004, Vol. 73 Issue 4, pp.133-138 at 134. Clausen offers some interesting insights into the 'grim pseudo-religion' that work has become in America, and probably many other places.

³ Martin Luther, quoted from Ewald M. Plass (ed.), *What Luther Says: An Anthology*, (St. Louise: Concordia, 1959), cited by Leland Ryken in 'The Puritan Work Ethic and Christian Leisure Today', pp. 35-50 in Heintzman *Christianity*, 43.

⁴ Miroslav Volf, *Work in the Spirit: Toward a Theology of Work*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 11.

⁵ Gordon Dahl, 'Whatever Happened to the Leisure Revolution', pp.81-91 in Heintzman, *Christianity*, 83.

⁶ Johnston, 'Work and Play', 12.

⁷ Johnston, 'Work and Play', 12.

⁸ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, III.4, (trans. G. W. Bromely and others, Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1961), 552.

as well as sustenance appear to be on view.⁹ Qoheleth taught that our 'lot' in life is to enjoy our work and play (Ecclesiastes 9:7-10).

Yet work is often presented as more serious and substantial, if not more essential.¹⁰ Volf defines work as, 'honest, purposeful, and methodologically specified social activity whose primary goal is the creation of products or states of affairs that can satisfy the needs of working individuals or their co-creatures'.¹¹ He recognises something we see confirmed in our daily lives, that, 'to a large extent, we also are what we do'.¹² Work shapes our self-identity and what we think of each other. He also observes that work changes over time, and industrialisation, urbanisation and communication have radically altered how we work and its impact on us. Work in biblical times was very different to work today. We need to be alive to the challenges this brings. Moltmann explains the dangers thus, 'anyone who inquires about the work ethos of the Bible runs up against the cultural history of past societies'.¹³

Yet there is great value in exploring the theology of work, as Cosden shows. After a very detailed study he concludes that work is not only instrumental, undertaken to achieve secondary purposes of 'survival, self-fulfilment, spiritual growth and building society' (as Volf largely sees it), but ontologically.¹⁴ This is crucial, as he shows how work is a 'fundamental facet of human and created existence'.¹⁵ He sees work transcending its secondary purposes (its 'use value'). It becomes a transformative activity where workers 'express, explore and develop their humanness'.¹⁶

Like others, Cosden sees work having eternal consequences and eternal value, as it both shapes us and our world.¹⁷ While both we and the world will be remade when Christ returns, our uniqueness, the 'who we were intended

⁹ Robert K. Johnston, 'Work and Play: A Biblical Perspective', pp. 7-16 in Heintzman et al, *Christianity*, 13.

¹⁰ See the quote above from Luther.

¹¹ Volf, *Work*, 10.

¹² Volf, *Work*, 26.

¹³ Jürgen Moltmann 'The Right to Work' in *On Human Dignity: Political Theology and Ethics*, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 44, quoted in Volf, *Work*, 77.

¹⁴ Darrell Cosden, *A Theology of Work: Work and the New Creation*, (Carlisle, Cumbria: Paternoster Press, 2004), 177-79. Cosden interacts in detail with the ground breaking work of Moltmann, and his work can be seen to a large part as an expansion of Moltmann's work.

¹⁵ Cosden, *Theology*, 177.

¹⁶ Cosden, *Theology*, 179. c.f., Barth who sees work 'as an active affirmation of existence', *Dogmatics*, III.4, 546.

¹⁷ Cosden, *Theology*, 185.

to be and the people we are becoming in Christ', will continue.¹⁸ Work then is an occasion for grace, for humble obedience, and an act of worship.¹⁹ Our challenge is to see how this can be translated to our lives.

Where then do leisure and rest fit in? Recent work demythologising Puritan attitudes to work and leisure, and deconstructing Weber's theories on the contribution of the 'Protestant work ethic' to capitalism, are helpfully clearing the field to see leisure as part of God's plans for humanity.²⁰ This goes beyond the Sabbath rest, although Barth is correct that the biblical picture is that this is fundamental to humanity.²¹ Like others, he saw leisure as a divine command.²² However, why is leisure good for us? Oswald argues persuasively that leisure is an end in itself.²³ He argues against utilitarian justifications for leisure.²⁴ Leisure exists not just as a command, or as a means to survival and greater productivity at work. Rather, we are made to rest and enjoy it as part of our identities as image bearers and being united in Christ. Hence, leisure is fundamental to our humanity. Dahl argues, 'leisure is freedom, opportunity and possibility. In Calvinist terms, it is the mandate to extend the Lordship, in terms of freedom in Christ, to everything.'²⁵

A practical problem in seeing God as the author of leisure can be legalism. The Puritans recognised God's hand in leisure (contrary to popular myth), but Baxter suggested 18 rules that should govern a Christian's choice of leisure.²⁶ He equated 'pastimes' with 'time wasting'.²⁷ Some Puritans became fastidious about time counting, and were so good at filling up the day with worthy devotional things that the modern 'time famine' among Christians was born.²⁸ Good things to do gave way to things we 'ought' to do.²⁹ We had less time for fun and play, and with economic and demographic changes (e.g. industrialisation, urbanisation and the need to travel). Lives became busier and more segmented. The laziness of sloth was complimented by the

¹⁸ Volf provides an excellent summary of the eschatological transformation we will experience. He says that 'human work leaves a permanent imprint on natural and social environments': *Theology* 94-97.

¹⁹ Cosden, *Theology*, 179.

²⁰ Discussed in Ryken, 'Puritan', 35

²¹ Barth, *Dogmatics*, III.4, 552.

²² Barth, *Dogmatics*, 555

²³ John Oswald, *The Leisure Crisis*, (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1987), 19.

²⁴ Oswald, *Leisure*, 38, also Dahl, *Whatever*, 87.

²⁵ Dahl, 'Happened', 90. See also Oswald, *Crisis*, 106.

²⁶ Hans-Peter Wagner, *Puritan Attitudes Towards Recreation in Early Seventeenth Century New England*, (Frankfurt: Verlag Peter Lang, 1982), 48-49, cited in Ryken, *Puritan*, 41.

²⁷ Ryken, 'Puritan', 42.

²⁸ Nancy Gibbs, 'How America Has Run Out of Time', *Time*, April 24, 1989, 58-67, cited in Ryken, *Puritan*, 44.

²⁹ Oswald, *Crisis*, 22.

laziness of busyness,³⁰ where we became too busy to love, and rest and simply be as God made us to be.

Our relationship to time is a large subject, and can only be touched on here. Discussions about 'work-life' balance often land on the need to 'repossess time', and to be very intentional about how we think about, prioritise and schedule time.³¹ Time is part of the created order (Genesis 1:1; John 1:1), and therefore a gift of God to be used wisely. Yet there is the risk of becoming slaves to time if we let scheduling and time-allocation dominate. One view of eternal life is that we cease to use time to measure our enjoyment of God and his recreation. 'Eternal' is qualitative more so than quantitative. Perhaps the way to put together the theologies of work and leisure is to think of them together rather than as opposites and not use time to keep them apart.

One of the fascinating things in analysing all this material is how people with markedly different approaches (e.g. Barth, Cosden and Oswalt) all somehow come around to expressing views that life is some form of continuum. It is not helpful to see work and leisure as opposites, nor to see our task as to allocate the 'right' amount of time to both. Barth sought a non segmented life.³² Cosden looks for an 'ethical equilibrium' and 'harmonious balance'.³³ His solution is not based on how we allocate time, but how we understand work as part of God's plan for us. Leisure needs to be given similar treatment.

The following suggests where assimilating theologies of work and leisure could take us:

Working, recreating and worshipping are all different aspects of the same thing. The same person is doing the same thing in an ideal and optimal state. When I can experience wholeness, the integration, the interrelationships, the continuum between my work (the things I have to do), recreation (the things I do because I don't have to) and worship (the things I do because

³⁰ Barth, *Dogmatics*, III.4, 555.

³¹ Jay E. Adams, *Shepherding God's Flock: Volume One, The Pastoral Life*, (Nutley, N.J. : Presbyterian and Reformed Publ., 1975-76), 39 and Costa, *God at Work*, 100.

³² Barth, *Dogmatics*, III.4, 520.

³³ Cosden, *Theology*, 181.

*of my relationship with God), then I am at leisure and I can experience the freedom I have as a Christian.*³⁴

We cannot escape time, and time must be measured to avoid sloth and to manage other sins, yet in need not be our master.

In conclusion, there is much that the separate theologies of work and leisure have to contribute to our understanding of who God has made us to be. However, when we consider that God has made us to work, worship and enjoy leisure and rest, there is almost a theological imperative that they not be in conflict. This fits with the idea that they are integral to our wholeness. Each is an opportunity for God's good to envelope us, and for us to do good. A wise use of time fits in here somewhere, but not legalistically. When we can work, and rest and play with the subjective sense that we are being who God wants us to be, and the objective corrective that neither work, nor rest nor leisure is self-indulgent, we may appreciate Oswald's wise reflection that, 'grace is an opportunity to not take things so seriously'.³⁵ God's grace allows us to do all for his glory, and the more that is our focus, the more we are who God wants us to be.

³⁴ Dahl, *Whatever*, 90.

³⁵ Oswald, *Leisure*, 101.