



Ministry to the Working Church

JOEL H. OINES

Tekoa Landing Community, Lake Chelan, Washington

Church bells once rang the work week. Their tolling out into the world followed the seasons and festivals of the church calendar. Holy days were holidays, and in them the faithful rested and remembered their holy history. The bells told Christendom of its identity and its vocation. The church presided over work, starting and stopping it for its own reasons, and accommodating it within the life of faith. The church undeniably had the opportunity to say meaningful things about the meaning of work. But it is different now for us who are the church. The clock has been hoisted to the tower; the hidden bells are nearly silent. Work is now presided over by the keepers of the clock in the factories and offices. And the church, once leisurely sounding the seasons and sabbaths of faith, must now be content with its tiny share of minutes allotted on one day of the weekend. An opportunity has been lost. The church must now speak about working from its precarious isolation at the week's end.

The days are probably gone when the church can call a holiday by the ringing of its bells. But the church still gathers its workers together one hour a week, and so its influence is still potentially alive in the workplace. This essay tries to suggest things the church can do to help its workers practice what it preaches about work. It begins with a discussion of how the modern experience of working assails the worker with endless demands on time and money, and raises the possibilities that sabbath can offer. Next there is a discussion of the difficulty workers have directing the consequences of their work, and some ways in which the church can help them recover responsibility for what they do are explored. Finally, there is a short discussion of the church's role in creating society in the workplace. These reflections are written in the hope that they stimulate thinking on how we can minister to the working church.

I. SURVIVAL WITHOUT SABBATH

The essential and enduring meaning in work is that it secures the necessities of life. In days gone by a person thatched the rafters, stitched clothing, and piled

the firewood near the door to keep warm, and planted seeds, dug potatoes, or took the rifle into the woods to keep from going hungry. The connection between working and life's necessities was short and obvious. If one wanted to survive, one worked. The community of faith since the days of Sarah and Abraham has always assumed the necessity of work. And when all under the roof were warm and fed, and evening had come, work was over for a while.

But ours is a simpler time. We trade our time for money. Human labor is simplified into hours, levelled into currency, and then exchanged for the stuff of life. Money simplifies things so

that anybody's work anywhere can be exchanged as money for anything anybody wants to sell. One's work is split neatly into time on the job and time off for consumerism. But once work is reduced to earning and spending, the tight and obvious connection with the necessities of life is loosened, and things get complicated. What is really necessary begins to become unclear, for what can be sold for money is limited only by the imagination and audacity of the seller and the income of the buyer. More and more things to buy—as quickly as science and industry can think them up—enter our minds and then our houses as newly discovered necessities of life. Greater income does not ease the urgency, but only confronts us with a newer class of necessities. Survival comes to mean consumption.

Reducing work to time and money obscures not only what is necessary for survival. It also obscures the human investment in working. Skills slowly acquired and faithfully practiced, inspired moments, good days, bad days, genius, and sloth are all hidden behind hours and wages. Workers invest themselves in their work. Their unique gifts, their skills and inspiration, and their hands and minds all create things, but they themselves are compensated in dollars which are just like everyone else's. Money so poorly represents human uniqueness that it must be used to buy any semblance of it. And so what one buys becomes the measure of who one is. House, car, clothes, hobbies, books, and vacations are purchased embellishments of a life which is reduced in the workplace to flat colorless currency. We must buy to be.

With time and money as interchangeable quantities, even time off has been colored by the careful accounting of time at work. Time must not be wasted after the work hours are over. We are busy consuming while the stores are open, busy being entertained on the thirty-minute schedule of prime time television, busy working overtime for time-and-a-half. We work long hours to earn the money and then longer hours to spend it adroitly. We are too busy with too little time and money for all the things we must buy. It is a style of life that would find the studied ringing of matins and vespers unintelligible. And it has a poor grasp on the necessities of life. It is instead an insatiable need for too many needless goods peddled to us as absolutely necessary. It is a way of work and life which, by consuming all our time and money, leaves us very little.

Though the community of faith has always assumed the necessity of work, it has also been very explicit about the need for solemn rest. Sabbath is a premise as big as the Bible and an idea that could surely be welcomed in our overly busy society. Yet we speak little of it in the church. That may be because we are the very people who keep the work week humming and depend on its regular hours and pay. It may also be because it is precisely work and its pay, not rest, which

buys our meaning. But we are bound at least to look at the notion of sabbath and probe for its meaning. We will find that it challenges our notion of work, for it says that the cessation of work in sabbath is what gives meaning to work. It does so by obliging the worker to practice humility, contentment, and generosity. Sabbath imposes upon its keepers an attitude toward time which admits that the world does not depend on their work. To keep the sabbath is to layoff and leave alone and in that experience to be humbled. Sabbath is not the day off for distractions, but a focused state of mind. It is the practice of regularly seeing the creation get on without us. No matter how important one's work seems to be, to observe sabbath is to confess that it isn't.

Such a way of seeing time and work surfaces throughout the story of God's people.

Perhaps ignored at times in practice, it is never lost to memory. Its form and timing changes, and it comes as a festival day of rest, as the time of release and jubilee. On all occasions it serves as a check on human enterprise, reminding us that the earth is the Lord's and not the property or urgent fortune of any person. Jesus found that the sabbath was kept in letter but violated in spirit. It had become another religious undertaking too much like work to honor the leave-taking sabbath commanded. The church claimed sabbath rest for its gatherings on the first day of the week and at times in its history has called Sunday its sabbath. Rest, gathering together, and the cessation of business as usual marked the festivals of the church. Then Protestant reformers swept clean the calendar of its saints' days and unwittingly prepared the way for the regulated workforce of the machine age. Since then the sabbath has been eroded by the high winds of urgent industrial time until today we have only a ragged part of the sabbath left and only a vague memory of what it meant.

The church is in no position these days to enforce sabbath. The world is no longer Christendom, and it is doubtful whether the church's own members would think of resting from televised football, speedboating around the lake, or the Sunday drive. But the church can coax us to practice sabbath—to help us be still now and then—and thus to realize that in the end our work is not needed, that all our plans, our future security, our food, shelter, and clothing are ultimately not our business. And that is needed. It is an announcement of freedom to those of us who have a room and daily bread. The world might find such preaching a threat to a burgeoning economy, but it would free us from pursuing the needless. The church should make use of every opportunity to declare to the world that it lives on altered time. It should help its people learn to sit still without being bored and thus open up big chunks of time in their lives which cannot be bought or sold. It can ring the bells for its own time, follow its own calendar, and when time comes for its gatherings, it will take time for the practice of sabbath and not cram the hour full like a TV show or a day at camp. In all its doings the church should show that it is not making discouraged concessions to the clock and the industrial work week, but that it is declaring independence and calling its members to sabbath rest which illuminates the meaning of their work.

Because sabbath is an attitude toward the spending of time, it thus implies for us a corresponding attitude toward the spending of money. In order to have sabbath rest, the possibility of having enough must be acknowledged. If we can stop work for a day, then we have enough to make do. Sabbath implies living

with just enough. That was the lesson for Israel in the wilderness. Seared by painful trials into the collective memory was the knowledge that it was God who sustained life. Time after time there was reason to long for the garlic and onions of Egypt and to weep from anxiety about food for tomorrow. It was not an easy time, but one full of backsliding, broken faith, and mutiny. But never forgotten was the lesson that where dinner ended, waiting in trust began. Quail and manna garnered for the morrow rotted away. Except to allow for the weekly sabbath, no one could get a day ahead. Getting ahead revealed itself as the rankest heresy in camp. And when Jesus came, he embodied the precarious life in the wilderness. He came to a society much less secure than our own, in which daily wage and daily bread were the currency. He and his disciples seemed to get along on little or nothing or on handouts. Food sometimes came from his hand like manna.

Everywhere we find Jesus dismantling the preoccupation with security—feeding and reassuring the hungry, dismissing riches as a dangerous absorption. Justice and mercy were freely given, making a mockery of not only the material economy, but the contrived religious one as well.

The church knows it must teach sabbath's contentment. How much better if the church were also able to practice it. But ever since the church made peace with the state, it has had trouble living in that empty-handed, precarious style. While ringing out the bells for holy days, the church amassed and protected great wealth. Even though there are people in the church who practice the spare and generous life of Jesus, we cannot seem to root it in our institutional side and nourish it there. In order for the church to practice the material contentment implied in the sabbath, it must not be identified as just another vendor of goods and services. Too often it creates just that impression, offering moral peace of mind, a full range of religious programming, or a home in heaven in exchange for a tithe or a generous clause in some Christian farmer's will. But the church must not be found wheeling and dealing in the marketplace of time and money, or it will undo in its members the commitment to the frugal contentment the gospel asks of them.

In order for the church to practice contentedness, it must continually remind itself that its institutional form is not the church. The church is the communion of saints. The church is not one more business in the shopping mall, another option for spending precious little time and money. The church gives things away! It gives the gospel first of all, but then also the collective love and energy of its people. The people of God are to be spent for the sake of the world and not invested for the sake of the church. Practicing sabbath and contentment may mean practicing a bit less "good stewardship" and a bit more sloppy generosity and empty-handedness. It means conceiving of the church without its buildings and letterheads and offices—all those things which overgrow and declare themselves necessary when they are merely helpful. It means conceiving of the church as a community of gifted saints whose sabbaths give them the humility, contentment, and time to think of something besides mere survival.

page 122

II. CONFESSION AND WORK'S CONSEQUENCES

For the church, work can never be just survival. Loving one's neighbor is central to the teaching of Jesus, and the church still teaches that neighbor love is work's highest responsibility. Among people who have the choice, almost all seek to work at something which is worthwhile, something which can help their neighbor. In our modern experience of working, divided as it is between earning and spending, we have two ways of serving our neighbors. The first is to find work for pay which is also socially useful. The second way is to use our earnings and volunteer our free time to help people. This second way of service is the one usually pursued by the church. Aside from the relatively few of us who receive a paycheck from the church, the church is forced to see itself as a free time activity relying on volunteers and voluntary contributions to do its ministry. The working world seems outside the realm of the church these days, and it speaks of the work week and neighbor love in a hopeful but general way. The church does not have a very clear idea of what its members really do in their jobs.

The modern experience of working is such that workers themselves do not know what they are doing. The social consequences of every job have become so fragmented and diffuse, so widely scattered and far removed from the worker, that it is impossible to follow one's own work to its endless effects. Such work may be inevitable in a giant industrial economy, but it creates

difficulties for the worker and the church who are concerned with the justice done or undone by every human deed. By the time breakfast is eaten and we are on the road to work, our actions have begun to affect many lives and places—Central American coffee fields, oil fields in Nigeria, shippers, sellers, local merchants, and highway constructors. Once at work, endless goods and data—their sources mostly unknown—begin to pass through our offices and shops. Purchase orders and phone calls arrive from around the country and world; everywhere machines and chemicals manufactured by others unknown speed the work along. Countless unseen workers bring us our work and then take it from us when we are done. Customers buy futons, running shoes, and handguns and then disappear out the door. Everywhere money changes hands and travels widely, measuring the success or failure of our work. And when the work week is over, a share of it becomes our pay and we take it home, perhaps the only consequence of our work we can really possess.

Once earning is over, we leave work and its consequences behind at the end of the day and go home. There the spending begins—and with it a whole new sequence of effects invisible to us. We buy East Coast clothing and West Coast wine, Wisconsin cheese, Hong Kong sneakers, or European vacations. Money put into banks is invested in South Africa and Mexico and elsewhere. We pay our taxes and the government builds public housing and missiles and distributes food stamps and campaign funds. We turn on the lights and the nuclear or coal or hydroelectric generators respond. We turn on the entertainment appliances and thousands upon thousands of singers, athletes, makers of soaps and razors, producers, sponsors, and stars and their supporting casts blare their way into our homes pursuing the ragged remainder of our time and money. Our work and the money it earns are like rocks dropped into a motion-

page 123

less sea—the ripples drift out of sight. They affect millions everywhere. Each, individual's work is spread very thin in such a sea of consequences so that at any distance from home or work it becomes a mere whisper of influence. But there are billions of rocks splashed into that sea until it is an ocean heavy with waves and currents, megatrends, national economies, recessions and recoveries, justice and injustice on a giant scale where the deeds of anyone person seem almost meaningless.

The church needs to get its fragile boat out onto that sea and begin sorting through its currents. Its commitment to justice requires that it examine all human deeds no matter how invisible or small the consequences. The community of faith should be intensely curious about what its working week accomplishes. It ought to be mapping out the justice and injustices it whispers into the world, and it ought to be seeking with all its heart to turn its actions into justice. Above all, the church needs to help its people who are beginning to choose their work. High schoolers and collegians can name a major field or a job title they seek, but they have very little idea what the job really does in the world. These people are notoriously inactive in the institutional church, which often tries to win their interest by entertaining them. Though it is difficult for the church to share their time and trust, it needs to address their assumptions and anxieties about their choice of future work before they graduate and march off into disappointment and cynicism.

Many in the church have already been disappointed in their work, assailed by the late-discovered realities of their chosen work. Some have too little choice now about what to do for

work; some never had much choice. Many jobs are not easily seen as serving one's neighbor, so workers content themselves with service rendered in free time and with the diversions their free time affords. The ministry of the church to these people is difficult. The church too easily becomes for them an alternative community where they can find service and friendship one day a week and forget about their work. The church must honor that need but must also seek with them ways to make such community and service happen at work.

For the church to track down and alter the consequences of work with loyalty and support from its working members, it must do so with fairness and compassion. The tendency in working is to content oneself with partial knowledge of work's effect. Professional associations and unions carefully draw the limits of a field's expertise and responsibility. They presume to do their own housekeeping, and loyal service in any job will likewise make a worker suspicious of inquiries into the consequences of his or her work. Workers must know that it is not some institution or church professional which is probing into their work, but that such probing is what the whole community of believers is called to do when it confesses its sin. The church needs to flesh out its confession, to take the time to make meaningful our confession of unknown sins in order to make as few as humanly possible the sins which are known only to God. If a person can begin to face the tiny complicities within that make up his or her work, then it becomes easier to share them in the compassionate community of faith and deal with them in the workplace. The church can help the effort by taking adequate time for a worker-sized confession and pronouncing

page 124

loudly and often the absolution and the admonition to go and sin no more. It can practice the accepting fellowship of broken but redeemed people. It can give courage to those who choose to confront their work's injustices. And it can do more. The church has been known to give financial support to those who for reasons of conscience have left their jobs.

Times of crisis will come to all jobholders. Sometimes a job plummets overnight from lofty moral heights. Farmers who have worked for years at feeding the world suddenly begin to read about evidence that they are poisoning and laying waste the soil. A person caught so innocently with such good intentions will not easily repent or come to confession. The church must never simplify the moral dilemmas that Christian workers face. It must engage in humble workplace theology where anger can be expressed, facts explored, and solutions struggled with. The workers themselves are the most likely to discover the ways to bring justice into their work. It will surely happen if they receive the compassionate support of their fellow believers.

Concern over the justice of work's consequences will eventually lead to changes in lifestyle. There are encouraging efforts these days by people in and out of the church to alter radically their way of living and working. These are attempts to reduce the consequences of one's life to more manageable proportions. Raising food, reducing throw-aways and garbage, bartering with local folk, eliminating gas-guzzling entertainment, and even moving to a rural home seek to keep life's consequences close to home and harmless enough to live with. In doing these things people hope to recapture the clarity of what is necessary and restore the social connections missing in so much of modern work. The church needs to continue its support for changes in lifestyle. It is finally a practice of repentance, changing the only things one has the power to change. But the church also needs to guard against any drift into a new personal moralism or the

equal danger of isolation which takes these people completely out of circulation and service in the world. Lifestyle changes have in them the seeds for radical social and economic changes. When the church encourages them, when it questions the justice of every human deed, it is fostering some sort of revolution. The church must make the marks of such a revolution not only justice, but mercy and compassion and gentleness.

III. COLLEAGUES AND COMMUNITY

Finally we must look at a social aspect of working which cannot be classified as doing service for pay. Work not only serves the community; it creates community in the workplace. To do good work is one thing; to do good work with skilled colleagues who share one's goals—yet who bring surprising skills and insights to the common task—is quite another. To work under those conditions is sometimes more meaningful than pay and the work itself. But such conditions—being surrounded by loyal and enjoyable co-workers—is too often left to chance. Certainly no logic in the production of goods and services requires that workers relate well to each other. Jobs are designed so that community is not necessary and workers can be interchangeable. What results is the isolation of the worker. Most industrial work is done alone at speeds which do not allow for

page 125

community on the job. The task is a small piece of the whole, the co-workers are unseen, and communication with them consists of just enough data to get the job done. In such isolation the worker has no clear idea of the goals, no idea how much progress is being made, and very little idea of the effect of the work and no one to ask. When work fails to offer community, workers often form a community of cynicism to belittle or escape their work. They join after-hour communities that meet in taverns, bowling alleys, or church buildings so that they may flee from the thought of work and the long hours spent in isolation.

The church ought to understand community. It is after all the communion of saints. It claims from the earliest times to be able to care for people in extraordinary ways, to care as no other association is able. The community convened by the Holy Spirit is the standard by which all other communities are judged. But it is not only the judge of community; it is also the restorer, the reconciler of all other communities. Thus the church and the workplace should never be in competition for the worker's time. The church will always lose to the necessity of work. To call people into church gatherings is in one respect to call them away from their ministry. The church should rather be a community which creates community builders—people who are workers of justice and mercy, workers who can create society. The ministry of the church does not happen in church buildings, for ministry is rather the work of the people in seeking corporate justice and mercy in every moment of their lives. The ministry of Word and Sacrament in the gathering of the community of saints is practiced to prepare faith and love so that the ministry of the church can take place in the world.

At the beginning of this essay bells were mentioned as a symbol of the church in the working world. I have heard of a congregation that wanted to install an electronic carillon in its church building tower. The congregation was required to submit an environmental impact statement to the authorities, and in due course a permit for the bells was denied. It seemed that in the neighborhood there lived at least one night shift worker who needed to sleep on Sunday

morning, and this person claimed to be disturbed by church bells. There is a lesson here somewhere. The church may have lost its command of time and calendar to the working world. But it still has the message of reconciliation which can infect the workplace. It is the kindling of that message in the worker which is the task of every congregation. Our words and our deeds ought to be good news to working people. Perhaps then they will even welcome our bells.