

Creation Care and the Workplace

When you hear the phrase 'Creation Care and the Workplace', what comes to mind? Perhaps memos about turning off computers and office lights? Perhaps constraints on travel, resource- use, and waste? Perhaps a feeling that the 'green police' are the enemies of productivity and profit? It's quite likely that there is a negative association: a sense that 'creation care' and 'the workplace' are somehow in opposition to each other.

Nothing could be further from the truth. The idea that the world of creation and the world of work are in conflict is a child of poor theology, demonstrating a failure to understand who God is, what the world is for, and who we are as human beings. In fact, all human work consists of what we do with God's creation. Whether we work with nature *directly* in terms of using 'natural resources' through food production, manufacture and industry, medicine, art and design, or *indirectly* in terms of finance, education and communication, all human work either uses God's creation or is directed to serve human beings, who are an intrinsic part of God's creation.

It is very important, therefore, that the 'workplace' is not seen as somehow separate from creation, or only as a place where we encounter people with whom we can share the gospel. The workplace is the theatre of God's creation, and also the context for worship: the reason we exist as human beings. How we treat God's creation is our most basic act of worship because, 'The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it' (Ps 24:1). If, in our work, we value, conserve and sustainably use God's creation, acknowledging his lordship, we do so as an act of worship. However, if we use the earth, its 'resources', and our fellow creatures selfishly, greedily, or without acknowledging them as God's by creation and ownership, we are guilty of idolatry.

This is why it is so important to begin with the Bible's first mention of human work in Genesis 1:27-28. Male and female are created 'in the image of God' and immediately given a job- description. The commands to 'be fruitful and increase in number', 'fill the earth and subdue it', and 'rule over' all other creatures, relate to our God-given work within God's creation.

These words have often been interpreted as a license to overpopulate and exploit creation for selfish human ends, and we've done a pretty good job of that. If we look at planet earth in 2019, with a global human population of 7.6 billion,^[1] a decline in

wildlife populations of 60 percent since 1970,[2] and the threat of runaway climate change,[3] we can see why an exploitative interpretation of Genesis 1 is blamed by many for our current ecological crisis. In terms of mission and evangelism, one of the most significant barriers for many people today is their perception that Christianity teaches humanity's superiority over nature and also teaches the destruction of the earth when Christ returns. We must acknowledge and repent of our part as evangelicals in terms of poor theology and practice in this area.

There are several important questions that this raises:

- In terms of apologetics, how can we as Christians in our workplaces articulate and demonstrate that Christianity is good news for creation?
- In terms of a theology of work, how and why is it that the fruits of the industrial, technological and agricultural revolutions have led to rapid improvements in living standards for many, but with a grossly uneven distribution of wealth, and an unsustainable depletion of natural resources?
- In terms of biblical interpretation, what is the big picture of God's purposes for creation from the very beginning until Christ's return, within which individual passages need to be understood?
- Is the purpose of creation simply to provide all that we as human beings want or need, or does God have a wider purpose involving other species and, if so, what are the implications for the workplace?
- What does it mean to be 'the image of God', and what are the implications for our human vocation in God's world?

This brief paper cannot give detailed answers to all these questions, and the many other important issues raised by considering creation care and the workplace. Instead, it offers some biblically-grounded propositions that articulate a theology of work in relation to who God is, what the world is for, and who we are as human beings. It will conclude by posing some questions relating to our Christian understanding of creation and work in our current contexts.

God is the source of all good work, and creation is God's workplace.

God is, before all else, the Creator without whom nothing exists. The Bible presents the whole created order as God's workmanship, carefully designed, beautifully constructed, and fundamentally 'very good' (Ps 19:1-6; Ps 104; Gen 1:31). God is a careful workman and reveals his character and purpose through the creation (Rom 1:19-20). Furthermore, creation is made both by and for Jesus Christ (Col 1:15-17).

From this it follows
that:

- We need to study creation carefully to understand the nature of our work, for the pattern of creation displays how God works.
- If creation is designed with careful loving intent, described as 'very good', and reveals who God is, then our work must seek to enhance the beauty, integrity and flourishing of creation.
- If all things are made 'by and for Christ', their true value is not measured economically but in relation to their reflection of God's glory. All human use of nature's gifts must, for Christians, be pursued worshipfully, with restraint, and with respect for their true purpose in Christ.
- Our work as 'the image of God' must reflect the character and purpose of God in how we use the riches of creation. Anything that disrupts natural systems unnecessarily, destroys other creatures carelessly, or depletes natural resources beyond a point of recovery cannot, by definition, be God's will and reflects, rather, the human tendency to sinfully place self-fulfillment before seeking God's ways.
- The principal of Sabbath, instituted in creation and affirmed by Christ, is a reminder that restraint, rest, and letting-be are part of the divine rhythm for work in God's world. Sabbath extends not only to 'time off for church', but permitting the land (Lev 25) and working animals (Deut 5:14) to have space to recover. Sabbath stands in judgment on the most intensive forms of animal-husbandry and agriculture, as well as working practices that do not allow people adequate leisure time.

Creation exists primarily for the glory of God in Christ, and only derivatively for our use.

'The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it' (Ps 24:1) is a familiar verse but with explosive economic and political implications. Alongside other passages confirming

creation belongs to God—in fact to Jesus—and not to humanity (Ps 50:10-12; Col 1:16), it challenges all who claim mineral ‘rights’, national ‘sovereignty’, or even ‘landownership’. We are only ever trustees and guardians of God’s property (Lev 25:23). Whilst God ‘richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment’ (1 Tim 6:17), he also provides for all other creatures (Ps 104:11-28), and he specifically instructs us to put our hope in God, not wealth-creation, and be generous with all we receive from him (1 Tim 6:17-19).

Moreover, the Bible is clear that God’s purposes in creation are wider than human thriving. In fact, the Genesis 1 command to ‘rule over’ all other creatures stems precisely from God’s desire that all the creatures he has created should be cared for wisely. To bear the image of God is to reflect the character of a God who creates a diverse, beautiful and ‘very good’ world teeming with biodiversity. Anything that diminishes this also diminishes God’s image within us.

Throughout the biblical drama, God’s care for all creatures is reaffirmed: Noah is commanded to rescue not only people but representatives of every living creature, and God’s saving covenant is with both humans and every living creature on the earth (Gen 9:10-17). Job learns that God’s care extends to places and creatures beyond humanity’s reach (Job 38-41). Most significantly, Christ’s death and resurrection accomplish the reconciliation of ‘all things’ in earth and heaven and consequently ‘the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay’ (Rom 8:21).

In terms of the workplace, this means that:

- All ‘natural resources’ exist by and for Christ, and we are answerable to God for our stewardship of them.
- Industrial or extractive processes that diverge significantly from God’s purposes for his creation, or that create large quantities of non-recyclable waste, stand in contradiction to Christian understandings of creation’s purpose in Christ.
- If creation exists to bring glory to God, we silence its worship if we diminish its voice through carelessly or deliberately driving unique species or ecosystems towards extinction.
- If God provides for all, and his saving plans extend to all living creatures, humans need to live in ways that allow the rest of nature to thrive. This has major implications for our industrial processes, our consumer economies, and our unrestrained population growth.

Our primary vocation in our work is to enable all God's creation to worship as God intends.

Human beings are both part of creation, made from the 'dust of the earth' (Gen 2:7) and on the same day as other land animals (1:24-27), yet also uniquely called apart to bear God's image (1:28). The image of God is a vocation within creation, rather than something that separates us from creation. In the context of Genesis 1 it clearly consists of reflecting the character and purposes of God in leadership directed towards our fellow creatures. God's command to Adam in Genesis 2:15 to 'work and take care of' the garden, well translated as to 'serve and preserve' God's creation, stand as a commentary on Genesis 1:28 and a definition of the ultimate purpose of human work.

In other words, the primary purpose of human work is not to meet our own needs or satisfy our desires, but to serve God's purposes for the whole creation. Human thriving must always be seen in the context of creation's flourishing, and both serve the ultimate purpose of all creation: to worship and glorify God. The final destiny of all of creation is found in its being liberated, restored and renewed in Christ (Acts 3:21; Rom 8:21; Eph 1:22-23; Rev 5:13, 21:5) which gives material things eternal value in Christ.

Implications for the workplace include:

- We need to teach, share and model a transforming vision of work in terms of our human vocation to reflect God's image and be God's co-workers in serving and preserving creation.
- Work that relates directly to stewarding the land and our fellow creatures (including *eg* agriculture, wildlife conservation, landscape architecture, biodiversity science) must be promoted and valued as particular missional callings, in relation to Genesis 2:15.
- 'Wealth creation' cannot be an end in itself, but must always take account of environmental impacts and seek to serve a broader vision of creation's thriving.

There are many questions posed by a biblical understanding of creation in relation to the workplace. Some of these will vary according to context, but in an era of unprecedented, multiple, global ecological crises which potentially threaten the very future of human life on earth, and certainly undermine future human flourishing,

there are several pressing questions upon which urgent reflection is needed:

- What are the theological implications of an economic system predicated on an unending growth in consumption, built-in obsolescence, and dismissing environmental costs as 'externalities'?
- If God designed the natural ecological economy to be totally circular, in that all 'waste' is recycled (John 6:12), what are we saying, theologically, by producing ever-more non-recyclable waste as a by-product of our work, and how can we change this?
- How can we, through the workplace, model a vision of human thriving, including tackling extreme poverty and addressing global economic injustice, alongside preserving biodiversity and allowing adequate space for wild nature to thrive?
- How can we frame our distinctively Christ-centred vision of work and of creation's purpose in a way that enables us to seek the common good in cooperation with those of other faiths and secular groups?

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Endnote

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1. <http://www.worldometers.info/world-population> ↑
2. WWF. 2018. *Living Planet Report 2018: Aiming Higher*. Grooten, M. and R.E.A. Almond (eds). WWF, Gland, Switzerland. p.90 ↑
3. IPCC, 2014. *Climate Change 2014: Synthesis Report*. Pachauri, R.K. and L.A. Meyer (eds.). IPCC, Geneva, Switzerland.

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