



Lukas Vischer: The Work of Human Beings as Creatures of God

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2. Historical Context

In the end of the 1970s, human work got into a crisis. The churches initiated several studies and statements and turned anew to the biblical witness concerning work.

3. Summary

There has been little discussion of the topic of work in the ecumenical movement during the last few decades. An exception is a study of the World Council of Churches. It departs from the tension between Christian faith or a fuller personal life and “work” in the modern technological society (J.H. Oldham: *Work in Modern Society*, 1950). - At the end of the 1970s, unemployment in industrial countries was increasing. In a WCC consultation on “Technology, Employment and Rapid Social Change” in Glasgow, 1984, hope was expressed for a rediscovery of the relationship between worship and work. - Since the encyclical *Rerum Novarum* of Pope Leo XIII (1891), the Roman Catholic Church has emphasized the dignity of workers and work. Pope John Paul II even speaks of a “gospel of work” (*Laborem Exercens*, 1981).

By and large, churches have seen work as fulfilment of God’s commission to subdue the earth. They have scarcely begun to address the increasing dynamic of work leading to destruction, injustice and misery, neither have they addressed the project of transforming nature, which makes human effort superfluous and might result in robbing humans of the fulfilment which comes from doing honest work. The ecological crisis suggests that many forms of work done today are irresponsible. From there the question arises whether one day “God’s commission” will be fulfilled and the earth sufficiently subdued, i.e. destroyed. Theological pronouncements have not thoroughly explored the *consequences* of human work so far.

The roots of the high estimation of work are not to be found in biblical texts but rather in the Reformation and much clearer in the early Enlightenment. Its prerequisite was a radically different image of humankind. Humans and their needs had become the “measure of all things”.

In contrast to that, biblical aspects of human work are: 1) The commandment to keep the sabbath. 2) Work is seen as a natural necessity, in order to eat. 3) As a consequence of the Fall of Man, the earth is cursed and no longer yields what man desires; so the fruitfulness of humans’ work is dependent on God’s blessing. 4) Human work is bound up with God’s creation and the rhythm of work and repose. 5) Physical work is understood to be a duty for all; Sabbath and Jubilee Years are supposed to ensure that injustice and enslavement come to a halt, even for the livestock. 6) The New Testament mentions work only in passing. But Jesus warns against accumulating ever greater wealth.

The most essential Christian contribution to the understanding of work is without a doubt to break down the stubborn identification of work and production, and to see work as a service to the community and a contribution towards social justice.

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WORK IN A
SUSTAINABLE SOCIETY

World Council of Churches



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The Work of Human Beings as Creatures of God

Lukas Vischer

What do the churches have to say today about the meaning and dimensions of work? What is meaningful work in light of the destruction of the planet as humankind continues to develop the earth? What tasks do the churches face in view of growing unemployment and its far-reaching social consequences? Up until now, churches have by and large said that it is the destiny of humankind to work. One works not only to survive but, seen from the perspective of faith, one's work becomes service to God and to one's fellow creatures. Work lends meaning to our lives and fulfills us.

How do the churches' pronouncements about work hold up when checked against statements concerning work scattered throughout the Bible? To reveal the answer at the outset: what we hear from our churches today about the role of work is remarkably contradictory to the biblical testimony. My suspicion is that this discrepancy is due to a process of gradual accommodation of our way of looking at work to the social project of the modern era, namely that humankind's nature and destiny are to apply technology to develop the earth. Although we cannot simply turn the clock back to biblical views, it is fruitful to listen once again to the testimony of those writers.

The topic of work in the ecumenical movement

Given the importance of the role of work in modern life, it is amazing that there has been little discussion of the topic of work in the ecumenical movement during the last few decades. An important exception is the study initiated by J.H. Oldham which the World Council of Churches began after the second world war.

This topic had already been raised at the Oxford Church and Society conference in 1937. Concern was growing over how difficult it is to bring work and a spiritual sense of life into some kind of fruitful relationship:

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The ordering of economic life has tended to enhance acquisitiveness and to set up a false standard of economic and social success. The only forms of employment open to many men and women, or the fact that none is open, prevent them from finding a sense of Christian vocation in their daily life...

While the irrelevance one to another at the present time is partly because much of the work is pagan and unworshipful it is also due to the fact that the daily life... is not sufficiently woven into the liturgy and worship of the church.¹

In one of the preparatory documents for the WCC's first assembly in 1948, Oldham discussed this tension between Christian faith and the role of work in a modern technological society. His ideas that there is "a fundamental contradiction between the claims of the human person and the whole structure of modern industry", while work by its nature serves God and "the complete, self-forgetting absorption of a man in his task can be at the same time an act of worshipping God",² found resonance in the assembly itself. Its Message said simply that "we have to learn afresh together what is the duty of Christian men and women in industry, in agriculture, in politics and in the home", while Section III insisted that "there is no inescapable necessity for society to succumb to undirected developments of technology, and the Christian church has an urgent responsibility today to help men to achieve fuller personal life within the technical society".³

This recommendation of the assembly was pursued in two directions. Within the framework of the WCC Department of Studies Oldham undertook a thorough study of the Christian understanding of work. A different perspective was applied by the Laity Department; they were less concerned with the meaning of work than with the presence of the church in the modern work-place. This latter approach attracted much more subsequent attention.

In 1950 Oldham's study guide "Work in Modern Society" appeared. Published in German as well, it enjoyed wide distribution due to the relevance of the question.⁴ Influential though it was, however, the guide remains curiously self-contradictory. Oldham's basic tenet is apparently that the chasm between the church and the modern world must be bridged. Two main questions are taken up:

First, does Christianity provide an understanding of life by which men can live, not in the parsonage or manse or in sheltered occupations, but in the pressures and conflicts of political and industrial life today? Secondly, does this understanding make a real and important difference to the actual choices which men have to make in every-day work? (p.5).

The answer, as he repeatedly emphasizes, cannot come solely from theologians. The church must break out of its ivory tower and listen to the voices of those most affected by developments in the working world, the working people. At the same time, Oldham voices doubts that this chasm can ever be bridged. Is not the very sense of human work placed in question by modern developments? "In so far as man in his work is reduced to the position of a mere functionary..., work ceases to be a sphere of personal and moral activity" (p.14). "It is the divorce of work from the personal life and from life in community that deprives it of meaning, and this is the heart of the problem of work in modern society" (p.15).

The task of the church is thus clear: it must help people to master developments in their work world. Will the church succeed?

The transformation of industry in this sense is plainly a colossal undertaking; it involves the widespread acceptance of ways of thinking and of a scale of values very different from those which are now dominant. The change that is called for goes deeper than the oppositions between capitalist, socialist and communist economies. Surrender to the autonomy of technical processes is possible in all of these (p.29).

With that we are confronted with the fundamental question: how shall we evaluate scientific and technical advancement? Here again we find only conflicting opinions. On the one hand, the church is admonished to find a more positive attitude towards modern society's credo of progress:

In particular, Christian thought may have to define more clearly than it has yet done its attitude to the great adventure in which mankind is attempting through science and technics to control and shape its destiny. Is the Christian attitude to this vast enterprise to be purely negative or also affirmative? Are we to regard it as a demoniacal assertion of man's pride, a "monstrous collective repetition of the crime of Prometheus"? Or can Christianity find a place within its view of the world for the demonstrated fact of man's capacity to discover the hidden forces of the world and to transform his environment? (p.35).

Put even more clearly,

Technical rationality can have disastrous effects when the attempt is made to bring the whole of life within its scope, but in subordination to the higher ends of human existence, and in its own proper sphere, its requirements have not only to be respected by Christians but joyfully accepted as God's order of creation (p.43).

In this context Oldham returns to the thought that work involves a spiritual dimension. "In spite of the danger of hypocrisy and illusion, it remains true that work acquires a depth of meaning in proportion as it partakes of the nature of prayer" (p.55).

On the other hand, the inconsistency between God's intention and humankind's self-fulfillment in this arena is clear to see.

It does not at all follow... from the truth that work is God's decree for man that everything that is called by the name of work in our present disintegrated society, which has to so large an extent lost all relation to God and his purpose for man and the world, must be regarded as a necessity of divine appointment... There may be forms of work that are without meaning and cannot be given meaning... (p.49).

The one thing that a valid theological doctrine of work will not do is to tell the great mass of men that God wants them to go on doing for theological reasons what they are already doing for economic reasons... The Christian doctrine of anything human must not only illuminate it with meaning but also be a criticism of its existing forms (p.60).

Thus the churches need to enter more into these new developments, while at the same time calling them into question. Oldham's study guide does not take us past this dilemma, it simply describes it. We are left with large questions: How do we go about realizing God's purpose in the modern working world? Which aspects of this arena shall we consider to be divinely prescribed? At what point is resistance called for? To what extent are the churches charged with helping to construct a more humane world? Oldham's study barely goes beyond the call for us to attempt a new beginning at bridging the divide. Few heeded that call.

At the WCC's second assembly (Evanston 1954) work was considered under the rubric of the witness of the laity in the world. Here the emphasis is even more clearly

on the affirmation of the role of humankind in God's creation, based on the assertion that "God has given to man an awesome capacity to change the face of nature by his work; the wonderful achievements of man in his work must neither be ignored nor regarded as sinful pride... The gulf between the church and the life of the world can be bridged by those who have a Christian view of work."⁵ Work is a necessity which is part of daily life. The sense of work is found in the fact that it serves society. To deny this insight is to fall short of the target. "When this happens the very rewards of work, greater wealth and increased leisure, are wasted in selfish enjoyments which bring no benefit to society at large" (p.164). Human beings are intended for higher purposes. While care must be taken not to overestimate one's capabilities,

properly understood, man's spontaneous joy in the creative element in work is a sign of that freedom for which creation longs and of the truth that man shall subdue the earth and have dominion over it. That his freedom and dominion are achieved only in Christ and his new creation is the profound biblical truth to which all human "creative" aspiration points, even though men often do not know this (p.165).

Evanston then goes on to identify a number of problem areas in the modern work world, beginning with unemployment. "There is an obligation upon society to provide all its members with opportunity to work" (p.167). Here Christians have a role to play as advocates. "The Christian view of the nature of work lays upon the laity the duty of promoting measures which will ensure the opportunity of all whose who wish to work to secure employment" (p.167). The report closes with the succinct statement that "all work honestly done, whether undertaken for the sake of earning a livelihood, or for the sake of the community, or out of spontaneous joy in creative effort, has genuine value and meaning in the purpose of God" (p.167).

For a long time this remained as the WCC's final word on the subject of work. Of course, whenever social themes were treated, the question of the meaning of work came up, but in and of itself the meaning of work was never taken up again. We were left with the generally accepted outlook that God has ordered human beings to work and that through this work they are to serve society at large and to transform the world in striving towards the goal God has set for history. Oldham's study and his questions about the meaning and sense of work have been forgotten.⁶

During the following two decades, the ecumenical movement struggled with the question of how to overcome or at least to mitigate the glaring injustices which the industrial society had propagated. How could the "rewards of work, greater wealth and increased leisure" in the world be more fairly distributed? How could one avoid the fact that achieving wealth always seemed to engender the poverty of others? What would it take to disrupt the mechanisms which divide the world into rich and poor nations? How might the poor nations come to have their place in the sun as well? However, the process of industrialization itself was scarcely called into question.

This began to change at the end of the 1970s. It was becoming clear that the increasing unemployment in industrialized countries was more than just a passing phenomenon. The churches were confronted with a new social problem on which they must take a stand. A WCC consultation on "Technology, Employment and Rapid Social Change" in Glasgow in 1984 sought a better understanding of the new dynamics, specifically the effect of new technologies on working people in industrialized countries. The report reflects the complex and bewildering nature of these

questions.⁷ While there is no facile praise or condemnation of the consequences of development, its inherent dangers are clearly recognized. The task of the churches was described in strong terms: "The fragmentation, dehumanization and manipulation of people by technology should be actively resisted in the name of Christ. Personal, local and global wholeness ('shalom') should be our aim. Creatures are accountable to the Creator, and this relates directly to our technological praxis as we anticipate the new creation" (p.109). But guidelines for implementing this remained rather general — basically a simple admonition to the churches to get more deeply involved with these questions.

Of particular note is David Bleakley's paper, which proposed that a new definition of what constitutes work was needed. "What is required is a shift away from materialistic notions which measure profitability basically in terms of a financial calculation. We need a new and truer measurement of the value of work which will take us beyond equating work only with a job, a paid position supplied by the market" (p.79). Precisely because the churches are involved in setting the boundaries for an ethics of work, they must also continually critique them:

Below the level of consciousness there is a stirring of alternatives which comes to the surface long before they are capable of conceptualization. The offering of these "alternatives" is now proceeding as pressures to transform the work ethic build up. Three areas of dogma behind the work ethic are particularly under attack: the glorification of the individual, the suggestion that a person's chief aim is work and the competitive base for economic activity (p.83).

As sharp as this criticism is, the report includes scarcely any theological reflections about the necessary alternatives. Only the introduction touches briefly on a theological rationale for work, when David Gosling proposes that rediscovering the "eucharistic meaning of work" — referring to the offering or sacrifice of bread and wine as the fruit of our labour — could open new perspectives. Serving God and work must be one and the same. He expresses the hope that the implementation of some of the report's practical recommendations "will go hand in hand with a rediscovery of the relationship between worship and work" (p.xvii).

The following year a WCC consultation on "Labour, Employment and Unemployment" sought to gain an overview of the new situation and establish the reasons for growing unemployment, as well as proposing recommendations for the future, in particular for the witness of the churches.⁸ The basic position of the study is made unmistakably clear in the preface: "Every person has to have the opportunity to be co-worker with God; therefore the Christian commitment is to full and fully adequate employment, here and now and not in the New Jerusalem or in the year 2000" (p.3).

The introduction to the report summarizes the chapter on "Some Theological Assumptions" as follows:

Work is seen in the context of God's purpose in creation. It is God's intention to bless human work, but he can only do so when justice, not exploitation, prevails and when work is part of human fulfillment, not merely arduous, dehumanizing toil. God has made humankind master over all creation, but as people work, they should start and finish by glorifying the Lord: worship and work must be one. Where people cease to be co-workers of God in his creation, work becomes dehumanizing and destructive. Here we have to acknowledge the existence of sin. Christian theology must be a theology which affirms life and hence also the adequacy of work (p.7).

The chapter itself develops these thoughts further. The starting point is that men and women are called to be co-workers of God. "As workers, we must look to God as the main worker in whose work we may share (2 Cor. 6:1)... In the beginning work is part of the act of completing creation" (p.63). Work is fundamentally a "liberating experience" (p.64), but it can become a curse, particularly when the "conditions under which production takes place" are characterized by exploitation and alienation. Through Christ we are freed. "We are called to become again co-workers with God in manifesting and sharing life in all its fullness" (p.65). The conclusion is that "it is vital for all Christians to understand, and for the churches to proclaim and teach, that God calls human beings to participate through their labour in the preservation and the ongoing work of creation and thus of life" (p.65).

In summary, these two WCC consultations in the mid-1980s were both marked by great uneasiness over the course of development of modern industrial society. Foremost, the churches saw growing unemployment as a major challenge not to be ignored. They set themselves the tasks of initiating and pursuing every conceivable measure to relieve the suffering and injustice which accompany unemployment. Yet this discussion of possible solutions remained largely within the usual framework. Aside from a few incomplete overtures, there was no suggestion that the phenomenon of unemployment invites a rethinking of the very understanding of work itself. Unemployment tended to be considered as an isolated problem. The more fundamental crisis into which modern striving towards progress has led us — the destruction of the environment accompanying the adventure of modern technology — has hardly been addressed. Yet without an holistic view of this bewildering and complex terrain, few solutions will emerge.

Instead, we hear again and again the conventional wisdom about the meaning of work: "people are meant to be fellow workers with God"; "in her job she is helping to transform the world according to God's will"; "his work brings him joy and fulfillment and he sees it as service to the Lord".⁹ Just how far are expressions like these really to be seen as "Christian testimony"? Just how much support do they find in the scriptures? Or to turn it around, to what extent are we dealing here with theological thinking? While the so-called "Protestant work ethic" is occasionally criticized in the ecumenical movement, it is not said what should take its place.

The topic of work as seen by the Roman Catholic Church

Since the encyclical *Rerum Novarum* (1891), the Roman Catholic magisterium has devoted a great deal of attention to understanding the nature of work. Pope Leo XIII recognized that a new economic and social order had come and that the church must make its voice heard. "The thirst for innovation which has long held sway in societies has put them in a state of fevered agitation which, sooner or later, must extend beyond the political realm into the realm of the social economy."¹⁰ Above all else the encyclical addressed the plight of people who work and pleaded for a new kind of relationship in society: solely through a constructive collaboration between the different social partners could just solutions be found.

Rerum Novarum emphasizes the dignity of workers, and thereby also the dignity of work. Work is defined as "human activity ordained to the satisfaction of the basic needs of life, notably to conserve life" (34). Work is part of every person's vocation. It has a social dimension "because one can assert without erring that the origin of the

wealth of nations is found in the labour of workers" (27). The personhood of the worker and his or her rights must be protected. A worker's strength must not be taken advantage of or exploited. "The strength to work is inherent to a person and belongs to the one who exercises it and to that person's heirs" (34).

These basic ideas were taken up repeatedly in the following decades and elaborated in ever new ways, particularly in the encyclical *Quadragesimo Anno* (1931). In its pastoral constitution on the church in the world today (*Gaudium et Spes*), which devotes a chapter to "Human Labour in the World", the Second Vatican Council went considerably beyond the relatively sober thoughts of *Rerum Novarum*. Building on the groundwork of two encyclicals of Pope John XXIII, *Mater et Magistra* and *Pacem in Terris*, it developed the viewpoint that "people further elaborate the work of the Creator, that they provide for the well-being of their brothers and sisters and, through their personal efforts, contribute to the fulfillment of the divine plan" (34).

The Council starts with the fact that humankind "has applied and continues to apply the means of science and technology to master practically all of nature" (*Gaudium et Spes*, 33). The Roman Catholic Church is faced with the question of how to judge this immense undertaking. The answer is unambiguous:

Personal human endeavour, this massive effort of mankind in the course of the centuries to continually improve living conditions, corresponds to the will of God. God created man in his image and directed him to have dominion over the earth and all upon it and to rule in justice and holiness (Gen. 1:26-28); all things were to be ordered in relationship to God as the Creator of all things; and all things were to be under the dominion of mankind and God's name majestic in all the earth (Ps. 8) (34).

That which humans create does not oppose God's power: "the victories of humanity are much more to be seen as a sign of the greatness of God and as fruit of his unfathomable will".

As humankind continues to extend its dominion over creation, this also involves a transformation of humans themselves. "By means of his striving man transforms not only the exterior world and society, but also perfects himself. He learns many things, develops his abilities, goes ever further and grows beyond himself" (35). Everything depends on how these abilities, especially advancing technology, are applied. The Council emphasizes the autonomy of the earthly realm. "By the very fact that they have been created, all things have their own value, their own truth and their own goodness, as well as their own internal laws and relationships; this must be respected by mankind as he applies the methods of the related sciences and technologies" (36).

Certainly the Council understood that all human striving is marked by sin and must be cleansed and perfected through the cross of Christ and the resurrection. However, the work of mankind will be perfected:

To those who believe in his love God gives the certainty that the path of love stands open to all people and that it is not in vain to attempt to bring about a generous sharing, which encompasses all... Although one must clearly distinguish between earthly progress and the growth of the kingdom of Christ, this progress does have great meaning for the kingdom of God, insofar as it is able to contribute towards a better ordering of human society (38-39).

What is new about this is the almost dithyrambic character of this description of human capabilities and accomplishments. Human progress is no longer grudgingly regarded; instead, it is given a spiritual dimension. These sentiments have been echoed

in subsequent papal encyclicals. In 1967 Pope Paul VI proclaimed that "in giving humankind intelligence, imagination and sensitivity, God has bestowed the means of perfecting the creation: whether artist, craftsman, entrepreneur, labourer or farmer, each one is a creator... Human labour, particularly for Christians, involves collaborating in the mission to give the world a divine dimension, to be sure incomplete, until all shall together constitute one who is perfected in Christ, as St Paul has told us" (*Populorum Progressio*, 27-28).

One of the earliest encyclicals of Pope John Paul II, *Laborem Exercens* (1981), takes the effort to develop a coherent Catholic understanding of human work even further. Both its date of publication (ninety years after *Rerum Novarum*) and a series of explicit references place this document in the tradition of Leo XIII, but in reality its pronouncements go far beyond not only those of *Rerum Novarum* but even those of the Second Vatican Council. Behind it may lie his experiences in his native Poland, where it was precisely among the workers that a growing resistance to the communist system was developing, with which it was important for the church to demonstrate its solidarity.

Theologically, what does this encyclical add to the understanding of the human task? Right at the outset we are pointed towards the answer: "Made in the image and resemblance of God himself and placed in the visible world to have dominion over the earth, mankind has been called from the beginning to labour; to work is a characteristic which distinguishes man from all other creatures" and "a fundamental dimension of human existence on earth" (4). Essential for understanding work is God's command to humankind to "be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it". Granted, these words do not speak expressly of work, but "without any doubt they allude indirectly to work as an activity to be exercised in the world" (4):

The expression "to subdue the earth" has far-reaching consequences. It refers to all the resources in the earth (and indirectly of the entire planet) which conscious human effort might discover and employ with benefit. Thus it is that these words placed at the beginning of the Bible never lose their relevance for our time... If at times one speaks of periods of acceleration in economic life and in human civilization... at the same time one can say that none of these spurts goes beyond the essence of this ancient biblical text. As human endeavour leads to ever greater mastery of the earth and its order, this remains, at every step and on every path, within the original plan of the Creator... This is meant to be so for each and every one. Each and every one, as appropriate and in an incalculable variety of ways, shall take part in this gigantic process through which human labour subdues the earth (4).

From this perspective even technology is seen in a positive light: "Technology is undoubtedly an ally, which eases, perfects, accelerates and increases the productivity of human labour" (5).

Work also has a subjective side. It serves the purpose of allowing human individuality to emerge: "by means of work... humans come to actualize themselves and even to realize what is essential about being human" (9). As important as subduing nature is, the subjective aspect of work is more important, and the personhood of humans is the measure by which we evaluate work (6). Creating conditions under which people can bring forth their unique personhood involves ensuring that they remain in charge of their labour. Work must not degenerate into a mere commodity. The means of production and capital are instrumentalities, and human beings should not be subordinated to their requirements. Human dignity also entails the right to

work, but although the encyclical addresses the problematic of unemployment, it does not take up the cause of this phenomenon, but limits itself to enlisting all in the strenuous pursuit of providing for the “fundamental right of all humans to have work” (18).

Regarding the curse God spoke to Adam after the fall (Gen. 3:17-19), the encyclical offers an exegetically rather surprising answer, arguing that “the words ‘by the sweat of your face you shall eat bread’ refer to the fatigue, often burdensome, which, since then, accompanies work; they do not at all change the fact that work is the path which leads to the dominion accorded to mankind over the world” (9). Although Adam and Eve worked in paradise effortlessly, their work had now become exhausting. Still, work remains an inestimable good. This is not to say that the encyclical knows nothing of the ambivalence of human labour. Indeed, the final section offers a second interpretation of God’s curse: “All work, whether manual or intellectual, is inevitably linked with distress.” Anyone who believes in Christ the crucified and resurrected takes up this burden. “In enduring the burden of work in union with Christ who was crucified for us, a person collaborates in some way with the Son of God in the redemption of humanity” (27). Therefore, in Christ work is freed from its curse and can serve its original purpose.

A separate section of the encyclical notes that Jesus himself worked as a carpenter (Mark 6:2-3). The one who preached the gospel was also a worker. Even though Jesus never spoke about the duty to work, “his life is no less eloquent a statement in this regard; unequivocally, he belonged to ‘the world of work’.” The gospel which he preached is “a gospel of work” (26).

The theses of *Laborem Exercens* are expressly repeated in the later encyclicals *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* (1987) and *Centesimus Annus* (1991). For example,

in our time the role of human work has become a factor ever more important in the production of immaterial and material wealth... More than ever today, to work is to work with others and for others... Work is all the more fruitful and productive, the more capable one is of recognizing the productive resources of the earth and of perceiving the deepest needs of the one for whom the work is being performed (*Centesimus Annus*, 31).

It is striking how far the statements of the WCC and those of the Roman Catholic magisterium are in agreement, even if the WCC documents are much more reserved and sober. Statements like “humans are called to be co-workers with God” or “as ordained by God, human work contributes to the transformation of the creation” could easily have stemmed from the Roman Catholic documents. In the spiritual grounding and affirmation of human work, however, the magisterium goes further than these statements and indeed speaks of an actual “gospel of work”.

To what extent is this outlook supported by biblical witness? *Laborem Exercens* claims to be in accord with the holy scriptures and to repeat essentially what the church has always taught about work (11). As we shall see subsequently, however, the biblical basis cited in the encyclical is extremely meagre, glossing over important texts in favour of the single phrase “to subdue the earth”, which becomes its exclusive hermeneutical key. Moreover, it is easy to show that the Christian church held different views of work over the centuries; and, as we have noted, *Rerum Novarum* and, above all else, the Second Vatican Council represented a deep break in the continuity of the magisterium.

It is also striking to note how seldom Roman Catholic writing has addressed the destruction of the environment. Neither *Centesimus Annus* nor the *Catechism of the Roman Catholic Church* has more than a brief passage on this, which has little consequence for the overall argument. Nowhere is it acknowledged that human work today is more and more bound up not just with the transformation but also with the exploitation of the planet. By contrast, the discussion of the ecological consequences of human activity has at least begun in the WCC in recent years.

Questions about human work

To what extent are these theological statements about the meaning of work plausible, coherent and consistent with our experience? And to what extent can they serve as a basis for constructing a convincing answer to the questions of today? Before considering the sources of the churches' understanding of work, we may offer some observations about the texts we have looked at thus far.

1. Certain difficulties follow from the assumption that God charged humankind with subduing the earth. By and large, the arguments of the churches begin with the assumption that human labour shall serve this purpose. It is only through human endeavour that God's charge can be carried out. How then shall we explain that human work has led in recent centuries not to greater freedom, but to growing destruction, injustice and misery for humankind? The statements of the churches do not answer this question. They do point out that these consequences follow whenever people stop being God's collaborators and start serving themselves, rather than seeking to honour God and to serve their fellows, but such an answer remains unsatisfactory. For even if we thereby allow for human effort getting off the track, the conviction remains that God is still involved in his project for humankind. But can one verify the assumption that when human beings work, it is ultimately done in accord with God's commission? Given the overwhelming evidence of the consequences of human striving, must one not question the validity of the entire project which human work promotes? The pronouncements of the churches do not seem to allow for this possibility; rather, they cover over it with reference to God's kingdom, towards which humankind is directed: some time in the distant future it will become clear that "the honest effort" of human work has furthered God's purpose in human history.

2. If the destiny of humankind is progressively to subdue the earth, it follows that human history must be understood as a process. Each generation contributes its part to take us closer to fulfillment of the plan. Indeed, certain Roman Catholic documents even lead to the conclusion that, in a certain sense, each generation is more fully human than the previous. Can such a notion be maintained in the face of the contemporary situation? No one would dispute that human effort has freed humankind from many shackles, but how much effect do such changes have on the humanness of human beings? The transformation of nature by means of human work has always been accompanied by destruction. Cultures have been annihilated and, in some respects, work has led to dehumanization.

3. How then is the goal of this commission to be understood? Will one be able to say some day that the divine charge has been fulfilled and the earth sufficiently subdued? The churches' pronouncements on work seem to assume that the process of transforming the earth will never come to an end. Each generation takes on anew the command to subdue the earth. Must this aggressive transformation of nature be

pursued in the future? Or could forces be demobilized or the process at least be slowed?¹¹ Or have we ourselves become subjugated by the commission to subdue the earth, stubbornly pursuing this process of transformation until the destruction is complete? The dangers inherent in this project are evident for our generation and even more for the generations to come. "Work" done today can have devastating consequences in the future. The world which we pass along to our offspring may be so transformed that their freedom of action is considerably reduced. The churches have scarcely begun to address this dynamic.¹² Here again, to make do with references to the kingdom of God is to obfuscate and avoid. Instead of looking towards the fulfillment of this charge within history, we implicitly assume and sometimes explicitly conclude that this project of ever greater development will one day lead us into God's kingdom.

4. The question of slowing down the process of transformation becomes increasingly urgent as the limits which humankind faces become clearer. Planet earth, which has been given to us to inhabit, is not boundless. Earlier generations might have assumed that they would never exhaust the raw materials needed for human work; today we know that this cannot simply continue without endangering the basis for life. Human efforts which exceed the boundaries set by the planet are not only senseless, they are dangerous and must be avoided. The ecological crisis means that many forms of work done today have become irresponsible. As serious as the problem of unemployment is, we must not solve it through irresponsible and ethically untenable work. In some circumstances, not working is a lesser evil than senseless work.

5. The project of transforming nature through human work is burdened by the very nature of technology, which makes human effort superfluous. Many forms of work burdensome to humans have long since been taken over by machines. But what have been the consequences of this reduction of toil? How is newly gained freedom from toil used? It is possible that people reorganize their lives in freer and more peaceful ways; it is also possible that the energy thus available is applied to new activity geared towards accelerating the transformation of nature. The success of technology is measured by the extent to which the lot of humans is eased. However, when this results in the loss of work, people are robbed of the fulfillment which comes from doing honest work. The pronouncements from our churches, which esteem work so highly, have not yet helped us beyond this contradiction.

6. What are the consequences of a growing world population for the understanding of work? What difference does it make whether it is one billion or eight billion people who take on the charge to subdue the earth? Can one imagine that ever more billions of humans will be called upon to fulfill this charge? Or must we reckon with the unsettling scenario that work, and thereby mastery over the earth, will become the prerogative of the few? The global population explosion, responsibly seen, is certainly a final signal that boundaries must be set to aggression against the creation.

7. Theological pronouncements as a whole have not thoroughly explored the consequences of human work. They have been limited to understanding God's commission to humankind and to the human fulfillment which accompanies this project. To be sure, the churches have stood up for justice in the world of work, for protection of the personhood of each worker and for the importance of work serving the interests of all humankind. However, little is said about just *which* work conforms to God's commission. This is the question which must be asked today. Church

pronouncements tend to emphasize the objective value of human work and excuse it from the deep ambiguity inherent in all of human existence. While they have often asked whether there are certain professions which do not conform to God's commission, the starting point has always been that there is enough honest work to allow for the fulfillment of all. But what constitutes "honest work" has become more complex today.

Even as they avoid the radical question about the meaning of work, the churches make pronouncements about work which underpin the ongoing project of economic growth, providing it (often perhaps unintentionally) with welcome support by extolling work as the fulfillment of human life.

The time is certainly ripe for asking anew if the churches have anything to add to the pronouncements about human work. Do Christian traditions and scriptures offer resources that many open up other pathways for them? To these questions we now turn.

The origins of the churches' present understanding of work

According to F. Hauck, whose 1921 study of work and money in early Christianity (*Die Stellung des Urchristentums zu Arbeit und Geld*) was long considered a standard,

the gospels contain no words of Jesus which are expressly about work; they illustrate in passing that, for Jesus, who was a skilled worker by origin, work was a given not needing further reflection. He simply accepts his people's way of looking at work; furthermore, the two major concerns of his gospel, the expectation of the end of things and the fatherly love of God, pushed any concern about work into the background.¹³

Ernst Troeltsch delivered a similar verdict: "The fact that God lets everyone work for a living, and, in case of need, love be the effective remedy, taken together with caution about the dangers of wealth for the soul, constitute the only teaching about economics to be found in the gospels."¹⁴ This finding was a source of great embarrassment for many, who expended considerable effort in search of other possibilities in the scriptures. But whatever the individual insights in these studies, taken as a whole they go against the grain of the biblical texts.¹⁵

It is generally believed that the ideas that God set humankind the task of working progressively to subdue the earth and that work is the means for transforming oneself took root in the Reformation. Luther and especially Calvin began to see human endeavour in a new light. The high regard for the *vita contemplativa* is matched by an emphasis on the meaning of daily vocational work. Instead of primarily seeing the toil in work, the emphasis falls on the fulfillment and joy of work. Max Weber notes that "at least one thing was unquestionably new [in the Reformation]: the valuation of the fulfilment of duty in worldly affairs as the highest form which the moral activity of the individual could assume".¹⁶ And even more emphatically a later writer argues that "work has become in fact a positive value, which goes beyond making a living to the point of providing a close relationship with God".¹⁷

But closer scrutiny shows that in their evaluation of the role of work, Luther and Calvin did not in fact differ much from the mediaeval viewpoint. Indeed, in a number of aspects, their pronouncements about work were diametrically opposed to the understanding of work held by later generations, particularly in the 17th and 18th centuries.¹⁸ The actual break in the history of how work is understood occurred, not in

the Reformation, but in the early Enlightenment period. The idea that it was Luther who gave us a radically different notion about work seems to grow out of a desire to distinguish the conceptual world of the Reformation as sharply as possible from that of the Middle Ages and then, to an even greater degree, to claim the Reformation as a preliminary stage of the modern understanding of work.

There can be no doubt that Luther construed things in a new way. His repeated emphasis that work on earth belongs to the human condition and is commanded by God and that under no circumstance should the need to work be denied or work be shunned is not new. Where the duty to work takes on a new meaning is in Luther's polemic against monastic life, the calling of perfection. His understanding of the justification of sinners through faith alone had convinced him that there could be no higher path to salvation. Monks had no particular advantage in God's eyes over common working people. "Shouldn't our hearts leap with joy and bubble over when we go to work and do as commanded; isn't that better than all the holiness of the Carthusians, even if they fast themselves to death and spend their days kneeling in prayer?"¹⁹ Those who obediently fulfill their duty towards God are on the only path to salvation. There is no particular class whose members walk closer to God. "God has ordained a variety of walks of life in which we are called to prove ourselves and to accommodate to, for some, marriage, for others, the priesthood, and for still others government; he commanded that all shall have toil and work and must learn to die."²⁰

These quotations also show how Luther judges work: it is toil to be taken upon oneself in obedience to God. Moreover, he speaks of fulfillment and joy in work, based on the fact that anyone who is obedient to God's charge to work stands in communion with him. It is often pointed out that Luther was the first to use the term "calling" to describe secular work. Reference is always made to his translation of 1 Corinthians 7:20, in which the Greek word *klesis* (condition) is rendered as "calling". Quite apart from the fact that Luther's translation here is certainly not accurate, it did start a new use of language. *Vocatio*, which until then had been applied to the ecclesiastical class par excellence, or to monastic life, now was to be applied to every believer. All Christians who carry out their duty in the secular world are living *in vocatione*. God's calling is fulfilled, not only by carrying out the evangelical counsels, but also by daily toil in the world. It remains open to question just how important this choice of words was in Luther's thought. Even before Luther, it was undisputed that God's calling could also be accomplished in a secular life and, what is more, the concept of "calling" never meant anything more for Luther than that each person was to follow God's calling whatever the station he found himself in.

The notion that "the true godly calling was that which is carried out in the world and its work"²¹ was foreign to Luther's thought and contradicts his fundamental insight of justification through faith alone. Luther continually and emphatically discounts the notion that human effort of whatever nature could have merit. To work belongs to the human condition. It is a duty. Whatever success is bestowed upon it is owed exclusively to God. To rely solely on one's abilities or to attribute whatever gains made to one's own efforts is to open the door to trouble:

For it is whenever one totally gives oneself over to one's work that stinginess and worry begin, and one imagines being able to accomplish much through much work. Thus we stand before the contradiction that some toil horrendously though hardly have enough to eat,

while others do their work in leisure and everything they need comes their way. This is so because God alone is due the honour as the one who makes things prosper.²²

It is God who bestows; it is human beings who prepare the ground for God's blessing.

To understand Luther's view, it is important to recall that the Reformers had to develop their message along two fronts — vis-a-vis the now-suspect spirituality of the mediaeval world, and vis-a-vis the new ideal of humanity found in the Renaissance, humanism and among the ascendant bourgeoisie. The Reformation can certainly be seen as a part of the emerging new picture of the human being; at the same time, it stood in clear contradiction to this picture. Simply to identify the Reformers with the growing esteem in which humanity held itself and its accomplishments would be to misunderstand the heart of their message: to proclaim anew God's dominion over humankind and the earth.

With John Calvin we find essentially the same picture, illustrated by a prayer before beginning work which he wrote late in his career:

Dear God, Father and Lord, since it has pleased you to order us to work so that we may provide for our needs..., may it please you to help us through your Holy Spirit, to the end that we may loyally exercise our rank and profession (*état et vocation*) without any falsehood or trickery, but that we may sooner seek to follow your will than to satisfy our appetite for riches; that it may please you all the same to prosper our labour, that you give us the courage to sustain those who are in need...; that it may please you to give us the grace to trust in your promises, to reassure us that you will nourish us always out of your goodness, so that we not fall into disbelief, but much more wait patiently for you to fill us, not just with temporal blessings, but with your spiritual blessings as well...²³

Calvin emphasizes the central importance for the understanding of work of the commandment to keep the Sabbath. Humanity has been commanded to work, but the meaning, direction and goal of life are discovered in relationship to God. The foremost thing is to remain open to God and to his word. With that, limits are set on work. The seventh day is there so that one can renew one's relationship with God:

We must always remember the goal which we seek. For the Lord has not simply commanded human beings to rest every seven days, as though he took pleasure in our leisure; but, having been delivered of all other activity, to apply our minds all the more directly to recognizing the Creator of the world. In brief, it is a sacred leisure or repose which draws men beyond the obstacles of the world, to be able to dedicate themselves completely to God.²⁴

That human beings are charged to work does not make them independent from God. Calvin reminds us throughout his writing that human beings always remain dependent upon God's acting. That humans must carry out the work does not suffice to make it bear fruit. That comes from God's hand. "It is the true test of our faith that we come to look only to God for all things; and not just to acknowledge him as the sole source of all things, but to trust that his paternal kindness extends to even the smallest of matters."²⁵ The blessing from work stems exclusively from God. By no means does Calvin conclude from this — contrary to current misunderstanding — that the extent of God's grace can be measured by material success. Although he emphasizes that if you work, you may trust in God's blessing, he warns emphatically against jumping to conclusions about the visible bounty.

For people tend to judge God's favour by the extent of something as fragile and transitory as happiness, and they tend to applaud the rich and others upon whom (as the saying goes) fortune has smiled; likewise they provoke with disdain those who suffer, and, in their foolhardy judgment, imagine that God hates the unfortunate when he does not spare them rejection. This perversity, to judge by faulting others, and to put things in the worst light, is a vice which has thrived in the world since the beginning of time.²⁶

As these statements show, Calvin is far from seeing work as the means by which humans actualize themselves. Work simply serves as a means to make a living. Calvin warns against accumulating riches. Above all, the idea that humankind was directed to transform nature through their work is foreign to his thinking. Genesis 1:28 plays no central role in his thinking.²⁷

Calvin condemned laziness and railed, as did Luther, against the parasitic conduct of monks. Characteristic is his emphasis that work is not just done for one's own good, but for the benefit of society as well. Shirking work is tantamount to denying this service: "St Paul accuses the do-nothings and useless who live from the sweat of others and meanwhile bring forth no means for helping anyone at all."²⁸ The labour of others must not be exploited. Calvin also advocates for fair wages and passionately urges that consideration be shown to the poor and particularly to foreigners.

Calvin was much more open than Luther to new forms of work. Although he too sees agriculture as the foundation of human work, he recognizes that God's commission can be fulfilled in many different ways: "those who help and draw profit from a contribution to society, whether in running one's family, whether in administering public or private affairs, whether in giving counsel or in teaching others or by some other means... should not be numbered among the useless."²⁹ Above all, Calvin acknowledged the positive value of commerce, which he believed promoted communication among people. Calvin's openness to the many forms which work could take led him to come to grips with the question of choosing one's career. Just what kind of work one was to do was not a given. One must discover one's place in the scheme of things. The criterion for choosing must not be the potential material gain, but the service which one can render through the work — whether it is "both good and profitable for the community and whether it serves our neighbours".³⁰

Thus despite the break which the Reformation represents in the history of the conception of work, the Reformers are still far from the modern notion of the intrinsic value in work itself. Only towards the end of the 16th century does work come increasingly to be seen as the exercise of human ability and activity; and in the 17th and 18th centuries it comes to be taken as the essential quality of humans. A genuine glorification of work sets in.

Holding fast to the idea that all human existence must be oriented towards God and his word, the Reformers made the bold attempt to extend this idea beyond its restriction to an elite spiritual circle to the entire church. This finally broke down the pre-eminence of the *vita contemplativa*. The active life now becomes the decisive dimension of human being. And more and more one hears of a commission or charge given to humankind to conquer the world and make it serviceable. Genesis 1:22 becomes ever more important. It is not simply in *contemplating* God's "good creation" but in *manipulating* it that humans are to find their highest fulfillment.

Self-confidence became more and more widespread. The active life is not only to serve to extend human dominion over the visible world, but also to bring enrichment.

Luther and Calvin both warned about work which is undertaken with the goal of achieving wealth. This barrier now drops away entirely. It is now seen as the duty of humankind to make the world, which God has spread before their feet, useful. Work is not just to be applied to God's gifts in satisfying material needs; it is also meant to transform the earth. The success of work is now measured by its productivity.

The prerequisite for this shift was a radically different image of humankind. Man is now given centre stage; and in his relationship to the visible world he finds that he must depend upon himself. The world becomes a thing whose secrets are to be explored through experiment and systematic observation. The knowledge gained enhances human mastery over the world. The call is not just to observe the world but to transform it for the good of all. Humans and their needs have become the "measure of all things".

The new assessment of human work was given its foremost theoretical formulation by John Locke (1632-1704), whose starting point is that humans are set above all other creatures by their God-given rational powers: "Understanding... set man above the rest of sensible beings, and gives him all the advantage and dominion which he has over them." Along with this comes the right "to use any of the inferior creatures for the subsistence and comfort of his life".³¹ Man is endowed with the drive not only to survive but also to seek happiness. "All pain of the body of what sort so ever, and disquiet of the mind, is uneasiness, and with this is always joined desire..., desire being nothing but an uneasiness in the want of an absent good, in reference to any pain felt, ease is that absent good." This drive for fulfillment is always present, and since this urge can never be satisfied once and for all, this process is essentially without end: "No sooner is one action dispatched which by such a determination of the will we are set upon, but another uneasiness is ready to set us on work."³²

The world was given in common to all. However, it is only as human beings cultivate and work the earth that it truly serves its purpose. Thus it is that human labour forms the foundation of property. Whatever is gained from the earth should become one's property. Resources which have not yet been developed are seen more or less to be lying fallow, crying out for development. What is more, human labour creates new goods. Humans are able to produce things and can enlarge the stock of goods in the world. Just as all things created by God belong to him, so too humans can lay claim to that which they produce. Of course, one must be concerned that all get their just share. But since Locke saw the earth and its resources as boundless, essentially everyone could partake in transforming the earth and creating property.

This was a completely new way of looking at work, from which a straight line leads to Adam Smith, David Ricardo and Karl Marx; and to this day disputes about the purpose and sense of work are by and large carried out upon this terrain. Even the churches — especially the Protestant churches — have sooner or later appropriated this basic understanding, not so much forgetting what Luther and Calvin taught as reinterpreting it to meet modern needs.

On the Roman Catholic side a similar process can be observed. The theological foundation for the Roman Catholic understanding of work looks back to Thomas Aquinas. Starting from his definition of God as *actus purissimus*, "the purest and most perfect action", it can be said that, when humans work, they approach God's very way of being and "consciously or unconsciously effect a resemblance to God".³³ Work can thus be described as an "important building block in the great project rising towards a

state similar to God's".³⁴ It is truly difficult to see how such statements could follow from Aquinas, who declares unmistakably that the "contemplative life" is superior to the "active life".³⁵ The contemplative life corresponds to the best in humans, to their reason, whereas the tasks of ordinary concrete life require no more than what is held in common with animals. It is necessity alone which leads one to physical activity. Of course, work is part of the human condition. Its purpose is for earning a living, overcoming boredom, reining in one's instincts and enabling one to give alms. Once these goals have been reached, the duty to perform physical work drops away. No further energy should be drained away from the higher activity of spiritual reflection.

Biblical aspects of the theme of human work

While it is not possible here to present a comprehensive review of how work is understood and described in the holy scriptures, we may briefly identify a number of essential aspects.

1. The commandment to keep the sabbath

The commandment to "remember the sabbath day to keep it holy" is undoubtedly of central importance for the biblical understanding of work. Its significance for the tradition of the people of Israel is evident from the fact that in the Pentateuch alone it is found 13 times, and there are repeated references in other books as well. Thus, it is all the more striking that in today's churches the sabbath commandment plays only a minor role.

The commandment is essentially a command to rest. Foremost is not the divine charge to work, but the command to respect the limits on human work set by God. Humans are called to worship God. This calling ought to be before their eyes constantly even as they work. Work and repose stand in inseparable relationship to each other. As necessary for maintaining life as work is, it must not be allowed to swell beyond its allotted time and take possession of the worker. Human work is, therefore, largely work done during the day (cf. Ps. 104:23). The commandment to rest calls humans to remember that both physical as well as spiritual regeneration is required.

Humans, as seen in the biblical tradition, are not primarily creative. Indeed, creativity is a fundamental dimension of their existence, but it is a secondary one. It is an expression of the high degree of receptivity which characterizes them. Before they create, they restore themselves; before they give, they receive. This restoring of oneself and allowing oneself to receive is the primary sense of the sabbath repose.³⁶

2. The commission to work?

Especially in the Old Testament, work is seen as a natural necessity: in order to eat, one needs to work. Humans must sow if they are to reap; thus work is an unavoidable aspect of human being. The Proverbs repeatedly recall this wisdom: "Laziness brings on deep sleep; an idle person will suffer hunger" (Prov. 19:15).

But did human beings receive a commission to transform the world through their labour? Those who hold this view often argue from Genesis 1:28: "God blessed them, and God said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it.'" In fact this sentence makes no express reference to human work, and if human work were supposed to subdue the earth step by step, would not more have been said about this process in the following chapters? Instead, however, all achievements of humans as

homo faber stand under an ambiguous sign: it is Cain who becomes a city-builder (Gen. 4:17), and Tubal-cain makes all kinds of bronze and iron tools (4:21-22), after which violence raises its head. And with what mixed results are human skills employed in building the Tower of Babel (Gen. 11)!

In truth, Genesis 1:28 is meant to convey nothing other than what follows in the next chapter. Humans were to toil together with the Creator in working the earth. The purpose of this work is clear: humans needed to be able to eat (2:16). According to the scriptures, humankind is indeed put in charge of the creation. But what most distinguishes humans is their ability to be in communion with God, not their ability to rule over the visible world. The fact that God has crowned humankind with honour and sovereignty does not imply that humans are to subdue the earth; rather, it forms the basis for their unending wonder: "O Lord, our Sovereign, how majestic is your name in all the earth!" (Ps. 8:9).

3. *God's curse after the fall*

To what degree has the character of human work changed as a result of human disobedience to God? The answer often heard, on the basis of Genesis 3:19, is that work has become toil. On closer scrutiny, however, this text says far more — that the consequence of the fall is a deeply disturbed relationship with the earth: "Because you... have eaten of the tree..., cursed is the ground because of you" (3:17). Adam's punishment is that the earth is cursed. Instead of yielding what he desires, "thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you" (3:18). The earth no longer stands ready to serve humanity; rather, it stubbornly resists human efforts to work it. This curse will not be removed until the time of salvation (cf. Hos. 2:21f.).

This new situation makes work even more unavoidable. Humans must overcome the recalcitrance of nature, and in this they are dependent on God's blessing. The fruitfulness of their work does not lie in their hands but is a gift of God, on whose devotion and faithfulness they must rely. No matter that these blessings have been promised, they can never be taken for granted. When blessed by God, the burden of work loses its sting. Without ceasing to be toil, work turns into joy and harvest can become an experience of great release: "Those who go out weeping, bearing the seed for sowing, shall come home with shouts of joy, carrying their sheaves" (Ps. 126:6). Nevertheless, the curse which lies upon the earth is not thereby removed. Work can also be in vain, and humans can become homeless on the earth which was intended to shelter them.

It is especially important today to recall this more profound dimension of God's curse. It goes beyond the fact that human work has become burdensome toil. If that were all, then in our present day one might succumb to the illusion of having outsmarted God. Certainly, many of the burdensome aspects of human work have been overcome by recent technologies. Alas, God's curse reaches far deeper! The relationship between humans and the earth remains disturbed. No matter how far human dominion over nature has been extended, nature ultimately remains beyond the grasp of humanity.

4. *Work in the realm of the creation*

The fourth commandment presents God's act of creation as the paradigm for the sequence of workdays followed by the sabbath. Just as God created heaven and earth in six days and rested on the seventh, so too should the people of Israel pause on the

seventh day. The rhythm of work and repose mirrors the rhythm underlying the act of the Creator. The commandment to keep the sabbath is more than just a pragmatic proposition. It establishes that human work is bound up with creation and with its inner order. Without God's creation, which preceded humankind, there is no basis for engaging in work. Without God's loving kindness, which accompanies humans on their journey, their work leads to naught. Without God's dedication to humankind, they would be stranded in the world. The recurrence of the sabbath calls humans to remember from the outset that their work is totally embedded in God's creation.

It is not only this cycle of seven which is determinative: the festivals of Israel also follow the rhythm of sowing and reaping. The sabbath entails repose not only for humans but also for the creation. On the seventh day nature remains protected from every human incursion. While humans rest, they may recall that "the earth and all that is upon it" belong to God and that God stands in direct relationship with all creatures. The sabbath is the day of rest for all of creation, so that it may praise God without interference.

This dimension emerges even more clearly in the practice of the sabbath and jubilee years. Every seventh year the land is to lie fallow, as well as in the year following seven times seven, the fiftieth year (Lev. 25; Ex. 23:10). God sees to it that the creation receives its due.

5. Work as a duty for all

Physical toil was not disparaged in Israel, and all were expected to do their share of necessary work. Here the biblical tradition differs markedly from Greek civilization, in which physical labour was relegated to slaves, even the crafts were deemed unworthy of free citizens and true fulfillment was to be found only in political activity. In the holy scriptures work is assessed differently. Of course, we read there also of exploitation and sharecropping, and slavery plays a significant role. But basically work is understood to be a duty for all, and all work is accordingly honoured.

The Bible is exceptional for the strong sense of social responsibility exhibited. The commandment to keep the sabbath does not mandate rest on the seventh day only for employers, it is meant for all: "you shall not do any work — you, your son, your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns" (Ex. 20:10). Workers are more or less seen as a community before God. Numerous rules apply regarding just payment. Sabbath and jubilee years are supposed to ensure that injustice and enslavement come to a halt at regular intervals and that the social community is re-established. The prophets raise their voices time and again against all forms of exploitation.

But this contrast to the Greek world should not be overplayed. Above all, it should not be taken as grounds for deriving a modern work ethic out of scripture. The argument that, while Greeks disdained work, the Bible praises it and indeed sees it as a God-given duty is scarcely justified. Although work is expected of all, so that no one becomes a burden to others, and all contribute to the common good, it is never seen as the fulfillment of human life.

6. Work in the New Testament

The sense and purpose of work are mentioned only in passing in the New Testament. Thus it is pointless to use them as the basis for a coherent theory of work;

and the examples cited by some theologians do not support the burden of proof required of them. For instance, it is exegetically questionable to make much of the information that Joseph, and perhaps Jesus himself, practised a trade. The New Testament itself lends little significance to this fact, nor has the tradition of the Christian church given much importance to it. Joseph as the patron saint of work is a 20th-century construct (it was only in 1955 that 1 May was proclaimed the day of Joseph the worker, by Pope Pius XII).

Human work in the New Testament is simply a given necessity. People work — they fish, they till the soil, they work in the home. Here and there various occupations are mentioned — more or less exalted ones, more or less honourable ones. But the theme of the gospel Jesus proclaims is the onset of God's kingdom and the new life which opens up. All attention is directed towards God's call to this new life. Whatever people may do or whoever they may be, all are radically subject to this new calling. For the disciples this meant leaving the occupations which they had practised. They are transformed from fishermen into fishers of men. But it is not only for the group of apostles that the coming of Jesus involves a reversal of priorities. For all who follow him, everyday work has to be fit in as best it can.

The words "deed" and "work" are by no means uncommon in the New Testament. But they are used primarily to show what Christ has done for us and what Christians are to do in response (cf. John 4:34,38). Many words which refer in their literal sense to daily work are used metaphorically to describe the spiritual calling of Christians: "fishing", "sowing", "building", "keeping house". This also applies for the term "God's fellow worker" (1 Cor. 3:9; 2 Cor. 6:7). It is by proclaiming the gospel, not by earthly labour, that the apostles become God's co-workers.

As we saw earlier in our discussion of Luther, the New Testament never uses the word "calling" (*klesis*) for one's earthly occupation. God always calls people into his service:

We must deplore and protest against the secularization of the biblical conception of vocation in our modern usage; we cannot with propriety speak of God's calling a man to be engineer or a doctor or a schoolmaster. God calls doctors and engineers and schoolmasters to be prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers as laymen in his church, just as he calls bricklayers, engine-drivers and machine-minders.³⁷

When Jesus preached the kingdom of God he also called for a radical trust in God's love and caring. Work is put to this test as well. Work is not intended to provide a means for ensuring one's future. Jesus warns against accumulating ever greater wealth. People should be aware that at every moment of their lives they are totally dependent upon God. It is not by chance that the petition to "give us this day our daily bread" falls in the middle of the Lord's Prayer. Work is the prerequisite for daily bread as well, but it can no longer be made the central thing in our lives.

This does not imply that the New Testament disparages daily work as unworthy activity or treats it as a matter of indifference whether or not one works. The pre-eminence of the actual calling means that "secular occupations are to be regarded not as ends in themselves, but as means to the service of the kingdom of God".³⁸ What does that mean in practice?

In general, Christians do have to work to support themselves. Paul spoke quite critically of those in Thessalonica who, for reasons which are not clear, shirked work:

"For we hear that some of you are living in idleness, mere busybodies, not doing any work. Now such persons we command and exhort in the Lord Jesus Christ to do their work quietly and to earn their own living" (2 Thess. 1:11-12). No one is to live at the expense of others. All must contribute according to their best efforts to the support of all others. Work also always serves to come to the aid of the weak, as Paul said to the elders at Ephesus (Acts 20:35). Paul held himself to this rule. Although he and certain other representatives of the community were apparently released from work for their duties, he worked to support himself: "We were not idle when we were with you and we did not eat anyone's bread without paying for it; but with toil and labour we worked night and day, so that we might not burden any of you" (2 Thess. 3:7-9; cf. Acts 20:34).

Daily work must be so carried out that God's presence and love can shine through. Christians should distinguish themselves by not shying away from the toil of work and by being attentive to the needs of others. While the New Testament does not expressly attack slavery, masters are called upon to treat their slaves justly and fairly, and to take them as their equals in Christ, for they know that they also have a Master in heaven. Slaves in turn are admonished to serve their masters: "Whatever your task, put yourselves into it, as done for the Lord and not for your masters, since you know that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward" (Col. 3:23). Daily work is supposed to bring about community in Christ. Work, too, is a realm where God's love can be demonstrated.

Consequences for today?

The context in which the biblical passages cited in the previous section were written is so far removed from contemporary reality that the question unavoidably arises of how relevant the biblical view is for today. Can today's questions even be posed from the biblical basis — let alone answered? Or does a close look at scripture simply convince us that the biblical understanding of work no longer corresponds to reality? We cannot return to the world as it was in the Bible. The preaching of the church must start from today's situation.

On the other hand, it does not follow that the assumptions under which the future of work is debated today should be accepted uncritically. Indeed, historical developments have shaken these assumptions to the point where they must be questioned. And here, precisely because the biblical view is so radically different, it may be unexpectedly relevant today, introducing perspectives into the contemporary debate which open up new pathways. We conclude by suggesting seven such perspectives.

1. Work must fit the creation

God's creation is and remains primordial to humankind. To be sure, the framework it provides for human life is not fixed once and for all. The last few centuries have shown that humans can extend their mastery over nature through directed research and work. Yet no matter how far humans may push forward along this pathway, it will not change their fundamental dependence on God's creation.

The Christian proclamation must call to mind that human beings, though capable of transforming what is given into things of new value, never become creators. Although able to stand vis-a-vis nature, human beings can never escape being a part of nature. Humans remain creatures within the creation, and their activity within the

creation runs up against limits. Since Locke, the almost self-evident assumption that the process of transformation and adding value can proceed without end has proved to be illusory. The resources available to humans are not boundless. In their work, as well as elsewhere, human beings must learn to respect this fact.

As we have seen, the relationship between humankind and the earth was disturbed by the fall. Humans can no longer count on their work to yield the fruit they expect. The old expectation that work will lead to ever greater freedom and happiness has not held up. Experience has increasingly shown that human work can also bear bitter fruit.

The bias behind the frequent reference to creation as "raw material" is that nature, in its primordial state, requires human processing before it is "finished". Has it not long since been apparent that human artifacts do not bring merely refinements, but rather that they prove to be more "raw" than the material out of which they have been fashioned? Does the insight that work also wreaks destruction not prompt the greatest scepticism regarding human self-realization in work?

2. *The deeper significance of the fourth commandment*

Precisely because there are limits to human self-realization, there must also be limits to the amount of time worked. God's commandment does not call for creation to be transformed on an around-the-clock schedule but invites us to find and observe a suitable balance between work and rest. The goal of human existence is neither work nor the transformation of the creation brought about by work. The goal is participating in God's repose. Even in work this goal should not be lost sight of. The blessed time of the sabbath is the external sign of this.

It is the task of Christian preaching to recall this deeper significance of the sabbath. It is certainly no accident that in an age when work is glorified, the observance of the sabbath has lost ground. The churches have erred in caving in to the so-called necessities of modern practices of production. They have given up more than they should have. Of course, mere outward compliance in keeping the sabbath can lead to a legalizing of spirituality. More is at stake here than just outward order. Work and rest are to be brought into the balance ordained for them by God. Work should be set back to a level that allows us to come before God. The fourth commandment invites us today to slow the work process down.

Repose also entails contemplation. The high esteem in which the contemplative life was held during the middle ages did not come from the biblical tradition. When contemplation is given high priority, disdain for physical labour cannot be far behind. But physical work can be seen as a healthy complement to contemplation. Hannah Arendt describes this as follows:

It is not wonder that overcomes and throws man into motionlessness, but it is through the conscious cessation of activity, the activity of making, that the contemplative state is reached... [What] moulded the concept and practice of contemplation... was man the maker and fabricator, whose job it is to do violence to nature in order to build a permanent home for himself, and who now was persuaded to renounce violence together with all activity, to leave things as they are, and to find his home in the contemplative dwelling in the neighbourhood of the imperishable and eternal.³⁹

Repose on Sundays can be interpreted from this perspective. It becomes a time of "inner work",⁴⁰ which humans need to do.

3. The precedence of God's call

What does it mean that humans are called to follow Christ? What does it mean that fulfillment is only to be found in communion with him?

It means above all that the value of work is not to be overestimated. A person's work does not decide his or her salvation, and it is at least misleading to speak of a "gospel of work". Nor does a person's humanity depend on the work which he or she does. Just as a life without work is unsatisfying, so, too, a life of exhaustion from overwork is without consolation. Our identity goes far beyond what we *do*. The true identity of a person lies in his or her service to God and to society. Work is subordinate to this dual task. It has no purpose in itself; it remains a contributive element. This insight is especially important in an era when so many unemployed begin to despair about the sense of their lives.

4. Freedom from material goods

In the New Testament we read again and again of how easily people become entrapped by themselves. Creating one's own world results in screening God out. As Karl Barth said,

it is true that in human work... there is built up an apparently independent cosmos of human capacity, enterprise and achievement of human attainments, goods and values, as the goal of all previous work and the prerequisite of all future work. It is plain enough that this construction and its history and current form conceal heaven... from man...; that this construction conceals God himself, so that man thinks he sees in culture with its vital individual existence the God who he must serve.⁴¹

Wealth has an uncanny power to mesmerize humans. Freedom, genuine evangelical freedom, is therefore only to be found through taking conscious distance from earthly goods. Both Jesus and the Christian tradition consistently warn of the danger in setting one's heart on earthly goods. An ascetic or at least modest life-style is taken for granted.

The modern understanding of work, however, leads in exactly the opposite direction. The "quality of life" is enhanced by the production of ever-improved products. Locke's theory of work and property is instructive in this respect. As human beings wrest things from the earth, alter and shape them for human use, these things become their property. Locke argues that the effort one invests in transforming material into things makes them "part of him". One's effort is fused with the object. The production and consumption of modern society is based on the assumption that the quality of human life is improved by producing and consuming goods. It is scarcely possible even to raise the question of whether or not this jeopardizes one's soul.

The task of Christian proclamation is to call to mind the basis of genuine evangelical freedom and the necessity of a modest life-style. What other path can be found out of the contradictions in which today's orientation towards economic growth entraps us?

5. What is needed for a full life?

As we have seen, Locke believed that humans continually develop new needs. Every need which is satisfied spawns a new need which begs to be satisfied. Through this ongoing pursuit of satisfaction a person's mental and material well-being unfold.

In this, Adam Smith and Karl Marx followed Locke. The "path of needs" essentially knows no end. Meeting human needs is the driving force and basic rationale for human work and production.

This view is of course highly problematic. Are the needs which are satisfied genuine? Or are such needs created in order that the process of satisfying them can be carried on? Have human beings not long since fallen prisoner to the very work and production processes which they pursue? More critical still: can those needs be genuine whose satisfaction leads to the fateful destruction of God's creation? It is becoming ever clearer that human needs have limits or must have boundaries set from within as well as from without.

What are needs? How can justifiable fundamental needs be distinguished from superfluous needs? How can the driving force of "needing" be reined in? How can one tell which needs exceed the boundaries set by nature? The answers to these questions are by no means evident.⁴² However, the biblical view may contribute a perspective here, precisely because it starts from a radically different image of humankind, in which the fulfillment of human life is to be found through a communion with God, one's fellow-beings and the entire creation.

As dynamic and creative as humans are, the biblical viewpoint recognizes that "actualizing oneself" and "satisfying one's needs" do not exhaust the sense and purpose of life. In order to be human, one does not need to experience all that life has to offer. To have travelled by all modes of transport known or visited all destinations available does not make someone more fully human. The biblical view knows that, on the contrary, one can become lost on the pathway of one's needs. However, where community is taken as the priority, one's needs automatically find boundaries. And setting boundaries is not a matter of stunting, but of focus.

6. Activity and work

Much is made today of the "end of work". This phrase refers to the fact that the production of goods and even of services requires ever fewer people. A completely new situation has arisen in which people now have time on their hands which earlier had to be spent in productive work. In many respects, this surplus of time is an embarrassment. How is it to be spent? Should it be introduced into new, ever more efficient and technology-intensive production processes? Or should humans simply work less?

To speak of "work" today is usually to talk of the labour force. Those who are involved in production or in other branches linked to production are said to "have" work. All others are "unemployed": Hours not used for the job are called "free time". Clearly, work which is geared to production has become the measure of human activity.

This narrowing has far-reaching consequences. It clouds one's view of the fact that the *vita activa* reaches far beyond mere participation in the production process. Humans are called to other, even more important, activity. Even though they are required to work to earn their living, they must also remain attentive to this other realm of action, namely, serving God and humanity. If the production process requires less effort, then the question becomes, "how shall the relationship between these activities and work be set?"

Christian proclamation of the gospel can perhaps contribute towards breaking down the stubborn identification of "work" and "production" and opening up the horizon on the wealth of activities available to people. Pointing up the fundamental value of human life is more necessary than ever before in this time during which work is in crisis.

7. *Work as service to one's neighbour*

The most essential contribution of the Christian gospel to an understanding of work is without a doubt that work is seen as contributing to the community. Of course, work also serves to earn one's living. Beyond that, however, the purpose of work is not to gain and accumulate property; rather it is to build up the community. The needs of the community rather than personal needs are decisive. Human work is meant to serve the community in the widest sense of the word. The petition for daily bread supports the effort that all humans may have their fundamental needs met.

Reticence on the point of overstating the value of human work must not imply withdrawal from the world and its great neediness. On the contrary, the biblical view stands out in its great passion for justice on earth. God's gifts are meant for the entire human race and may not be withheld from anyone. The sense of human work is measured by the extent to which it contributes towards social justice.

The Christian community is the place where this mutual caring for one another is practised and shown as an example: "There was not a needy person among them" (Acts 4:34). This is the witness which must also be carried out into the world today.

NOTES

¹ From the Oxford conference report, *The Churches Survey Their Task*, London, Allen & Unwin, 1937, pp.60,127.

² *Man's Disorder and God's Design*, vol. 3, "The Church and the Disorder of Society", New York, Harper, 1949, pp.133,131.

³ W.A. Visser 't Hooft, ed., *The First Assembly of the World Council of Churches*, London, SCM, 1949, pp.10,198.

⁴ Alan Richardson's *The Biblical Doctrine of Work*, London, SCM, 1952, was apparently prompted by Oldham's work; and Walther Bienert, *Die Arbeit nach der Lehre der Bibel*, Stuttgart, Evangelisches Verlagswerk, 1954, expressly credits Oldham as the stimulus for some of his reflections (p.14). Independently, Karl Barth took up this theme in *Church Dogmatics*, III/4, Eng. tr., Edinburgh, T. & T. Clark, 1962, pp.470ff.

⁵ From the report of Section VI on the laity, in *The Evanston Report*, London, SCM, 1955, pp.164-67.

⁶ E.g., there is no mention of Oldham in the entry on "work" by Gregory Baum in Lossky et al., eds, *Dictionary of the Ecumenical Movement*, Geneva, WCC, 1991, pp.1076f.

⁷ Howard Davis & David Gosling, eds, *Will the Future Work? Values for Emerging Patterns of Work and Employment*, Geneva, WCC, 1985.

⁸ Reginald Green, ed., *Labour, Employment and Unemployment: An Ecumenical Reappraisal*, Geneva, WCC Advisory Group on Economic Matters, 1987.

⁹ The 1977 confession of the Presbyterian Church in Cuba is a typical recent example of how churches often use the biblical witness to glorify the role of work, which is described as "a principle of human spirituality" and "the means by which we exercise our calling as caretakers". The affirmation that "the human being is primarily a worker" is linked to creation "in the image and likeness of God", who worked six days so that he could rest on the seventh. The New Testament is cited in support of the claim that "idleness is the sacrilegious vice of the 'old man'". Thus, "the church is faithful to the holy scriptures and

to the gospel when it invites all human beings, and especially believers, to enter into the historical project of 'dominating nature through creative work and administration of the goods produced'. For the full text see Lukas Vischer, *Reformed Witness Today: A Collection of Confessions and Statements of Faith Issued by Reformed Churches*, Bern, Evangelische Arbeitsstelle Ökumene Schweiz, 1982, p.174.

¹⁹ Denis Maugenest, *Le discours social de l'Eglise catholique*, Paris, Centurion, 1985, p.30.

²¹ On this see the chapters "Neuzeit als Mobilmachung" and "Mobilmachung des Planeten durch die Gestalt des Arbeiters", in Peter Sloterdijk, *Eurotaoismus: Zur Kritik der politischen Kinetik*, Frankfurt, Suhrkamp, 1989, pp. 21ff., 50ff.

²² Aside from an isolated and quite surprising comment in the report from the 1937 Oxford conference: "The resources of the earth, such as the soil and mineral wealth, should be recognized as gifts of God to the whole human race, and used with due and balanced consideration of present and future generations" (*op. cit.*, p.117).

²³ This quotation is from Hauck's entry on work in Th. Klauser, ed., *Reallexikon für Antike und Christentum*, vol. 1, Stuttgart, Hiersemann, 1950, pp.588f.

²⁴ E. Troeltsch, *Die Soziallehren der christlichen Kirchen und Gruppen*, Tübingen, J.C.B. Mohr, 1923, vol. 1, p.46.

²⁵ This is repeatedly demonstrated by Bienert, *op. cit.*

²⁶ M. Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, tr. Talcott Parsons, London, Allen & Unwin, 3d ed. 1976, p.80.

²⁷ Klara Vontobel, *Das Arbeitsethos des deutschen Protestantismus von der nachreformatorischen Zeit bis zur Aufklärung*, dissertation Univ. of Bern, 1946, p.9.

²⁸ Konrad Wiedemann, *Arbeit und Bürgertum*, Heidelberg, Universitätsverlag C. Winter, 1979, p.135.

²⁹ WA, 30,1, p.149.

³⁰ WA, 2, p.734, cited by Wiedemann, *op. cit.*, p.118.

³¹ Karl Holl, *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Kirchengeschichte*, Tübingen, J.C.B. Mohr, 1928, vol. 3, p.219. On the entire question of calling cf. Bienert, *op. cit.*, and Wiedemann, *op. cit.*

³² WA, 15, p.366.

³³ For this entire section on Calvin cf. André Biéler, *La pensée économique et sociale de Calvin*, Geneva, Georg, 1959.

³⁴ *Commentary* on Gen. 2:3; cf. Biéler, *op. cit.*, pp.393f.

³⁵ *Commentary* on Matt. 6:11; cf. Biéler, *op. cit.*, pp.399f.

³⁶ *Commentary* on Ps. 41:1; cf. Biéler, *op. cit.*, p.311.

³⁷ E.g., "In fact, it is not a small matter that it pleased God to create us and to put us in this world, not just to live here like beasts of burden, but to rule here like his children and to have dominion over all creatures"; *Sermon* on Eph. 6:1-4; cf. Biéler, *op. cit.*, p.400.

³⁸ *Commentary* on 2 Thess. 3:10; cf. Biéler, *op. cit.*, pp.406-408.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ *Sermon* on Eph. 5:26-28; cf. Biéler, *op. cit.*, p.404.

⁴¹ *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, I, 1,92.

⁴² *Ibid.*, II, 21,31,45.

⁴³ J.B. Kraus, *Scholastik, Puritanismus und Kapitalismus*, Munich and Leipzig, 1930, pp.72f.

⁴⁴ F.X. Eberle, *Arbeitsmotive im Lichte christlicher Ethik*, Erlangen, 1912, p.15.

⁴⁵ *Summa Theologica*, II-II, q.182a,1,2; cf. Wiedemann, *op. cit.*, pp.90f.; Bienert, *op. cit.*, pp.3f.

⁴⁶ Miroslav Volf, *Zukunft der Arbeit, Arbeit der Zukunft: Der Arbeitsbegriff bei Karl Marx und seine theologische Wertung*, Munich and Mainz, Kaiser, 1988, pp.164f.

⁴⁷ Richardson, *op. cit.*, p.36.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p.37.

⁴⁹ Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, Chicago, Univ. of Chicago Press, 1958, pp.303f.

⁵⁰ The phrase is from Matthew Fox in *The Reinvention of Work: A New Vision of Livelihood for Our Time*, San Francisco, Harper, 1994.

⁵¹ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, III/4, pp.521f.

⁵² Cf. M. Volf, *op. cit.*, pp.143-58.