

2015

Faithful Witness in Work and Rest

William Schumacher

Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, schumacherw@csl.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholar.csl.edu/cj>

 Part of the [Practical Theology Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Schumacher, William (2015) "Faithful Witness in Work and Rest," *Concordia Journal*: Vol. 41: No. 2, Article 5.

Available at: <http://scholar.csl.edu/cj/vol41/iss2/5>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Scholarly Resources from Concordia Seminary. It has been accepted for inclusion in Concordia Journal by an authorized administrator of Scholarly Resources from Concordia Seminary. For more information, please contact seitzw@csl.edu.

Faithful Witness in Work and Rest

William W. Schumacher

Work

“Vocation” and the Sacred Secular

In the summer of 1977 I was more or less gainfully employed, putting up hay in Oklahoma. I worked for a man named Dude (his real name). Dude usually drove the baler, leaving long rows of eighty-pound bales stretched across the fields. My job was to follow, pick them up, and haul them to the hay barn. Dude did not believe in the virtues of excessive mechanization, so I used no fancy equipment to hoist or stack the bales: that was what I was supposed to do, and I was the foreman of a crew of one. Since I didn't have a truck of my own, Dude let me use his old, beat-up F-150. With a little practice, I could line up the pickup at one end of a row of bales, put it in the lowest gear and let it idle forward at a walking pace, while I hopped out and threw the bales up into the back. Occasionally, of course, I had to jump back behind the wheel and adjust the course, or even stop and get the bales stacked properly. Once I had a sufficient pile of bales on the pickup, I drove to the barn, backed in, and re-stacked the hay up to the rafters. This is called “bucking bales” and I doubt that it's legal anymore. Dude did not think I should be paid by the hour—I guess I was theoretically some kind of “independent contractor” or something—so I was paid by the amount of hay deposited in the barn. For bucking bales in the scorching heat, I got a dollar a ton. That was the worst job I ever had—so far.

We all work: labor in dizzying variety is part of daily human experience and necessity. Bucking bales for a dollar a ton must surely be regarded as a clear consequence of the fall, but labor and work were part of God's original design for human life even in the garden.

As Christians, and perhaps particularly as Lutherans, we have learned well how to think and speak about human work and its value. For starters, the Lutheran idea of human work is positive; ordinary human work is sanctified by God's command and promise. The Creator himself is at work through every day human beings in their normal occupations: farmers, builders, shoemakers, bakers, computer programmers, artists, parents, teachers, rulers, etc. Luther (and other reformers, too) discovered (or “recovered”) the positive value of ordinary human work. This positive value of ordinary human life, including work, lies at the heart of the Lutheran doctrine of vocation.

William W. Schumacher is a professor of historical theology, chair of the historical theology department, and director of the Institute for Mission Studies at Concordia Seminary, Saint Louis, Missouri.



“Vocation” is usually defined as duty and responsibility. The way we use the term is shaped by a Reformation insight about the value of common human tasks—specifically seeing those occupations of people in the world as God-pleasing and proper pursuits for Christians. The Reformation thus reclaims “secular” life as the sphere for genuine service to God (through the neighbor) and corrected a medieval exaltation of the religious life. Priests, monks, and nuns had been seen as engaged in higher, spiritually superior ways of life, practicing meritorious religious acts of devotion and sacrifice that were not ordinarily possible for the non-religious. The Reformation reordered the whole theological understanding of life through the gospel.

This value of the ordinary callings of life—even “secular” life, although the sacred/secular distinction doesn’t really apply in Lutheran terms—is partly a corollary of the doctrine of justification by grace through faith (cf. the essay by Charles Arand and Erik Herrmann). No special human religious works contribute to salvation. And so the Reformation recovery of “vocation” was partly a reaction against the medieval monastic ideal of the religious life.

At this point it may be helpful to take a slight detour to consider the idea of “religious vocation.” Roman Catholics, of course, use the word “vocation” in a narrower, more technical sense than Lutherans: it refers to the prayerful discernment and decision by individuals to dedicate themselves to a consecrated (religious) life as priests, monks, or nuns. While the Catholic Church does recognize certain forms of consecrated life as available to lay Christians, common usage reserves the term “vocation” for publicly professing and dedicating oneself in the form of specific religious vows.

In theory, Lutherans have abandoned the idea of a special religious life as one of special, higher spiritual status and value. In practice, though, we frequently hear people (clergy and laity alike) speak as if the public ministry of the word were very much such a special, divinely pleasing caste or estate, elevated above ordinary human life. In a curious twist of vocabulary, we Lutherans tend to reserve the Latinate term “vocation” as the word for *lay* responsibilities and duties, while we use the plain Anglo-Saxon “call” (and even, emphatically, “*divine* call”) as the distinct, technical designation for that which distinguishes the public ministry. A “call,” of course, is celebrated and sanctified with special reverence and ritual that are usually not attached to other (“mere”) vocations.

Why would Lutherans value the “divine call” into the Holy Ministry above merely “secular” vocations? Does this re-introduce and perpetuate an un-Lutheran notion of the religious life as spiritually higher and more valuable than common human forms of life and work? In theory, at least, it does not: the ministry is valued because through it God comes to us in his saving gospel in its preached, taught, and sacramental forms.

Those who are “called” (as distinct—illogically—from those who simply have a “vocation”) thus have the uniquely important task and privilege of busying themselves with our salvation. And here is a place where our thinking and language suffer if we

operate with too small a version of God's story. When our understanding of salvation is truncated and caricatured into an inadequate narrative of mere escape from the world, of "getting saved" and "going to heaven," then those who mediate such escape are supremely important and all other, merely earthly occupations have no real meaning. Remember Charles Arand's pithy summary of the truncated story: "I've sinned. I'm saved. I'm out of here." If that is our story, then the one who can get me "out of here" and into heaven is more important than all the ones engaged in worldly matters. I wonder how many pious Lutheran laypeople today harbor such a secret doubt about the meaning and value of their own work.

But enough about our ambiguity regarding specifically religious vocation. The value of ordinary human work—all so-called "secular" occupations and duties—was and is a pivotal insight of the Reformation. In this view "religious" life has no special status or privilege. In fact, man-made patterns of religious devotion and self-selected discipline are actually harmful because they are not based on the word of God and because they encourage people to rely on their own works and behavior as a basis for their status before God. Article XXVII of the Augsburg Confession discusses this problem at some length, with special reference to the vows which distinguished the religious life from ordinary Christian life in the world:

It was pretended that monastic vows would be equal to baptism, and that through monastic life one could earn forgiveness of sin and justification before God. Indeed, they added that one earns through monastic life not only righteousness and innocence, but also that through it one keeps the commands and counsels written in the gospel. In this way monastic vows were praised more highly than baptism. It was also said that one could earn more merit through the monastic life than through all other walks of life, which had been ordered by God, such as the office of pastor or preacher, the office of ruler, prince, lord, and the like. (These all serve in their vocations according to God's command, Word, and mandate without any contrived spiritual status.) [AC XXVII.11–13]

Not only are the tasks of preachers, rulers, and princes carried out by God's command, but all ordinary human work is seen as holy and sacred when we recognize that the Creator is at work through human instruments (or "masks"). Article XVI offers a good example of this transformed view:

Concerning public order and secular government it is taught that all political authority, orderly government, laws, and good order in the world are created and instituted by God and that Christians may without sin exercise political authority; be princes and judges; pass sentences and administer justice according to imperial and other existing laws; punish evildoers with the sword; wage just wars; serve as soldiers; buy and sell; take required oaths; possess property; be married; etc. Condemned here are the Anabaptists who teach that none of the things above is Christian. Also condemned are those

who teach that Christian perfection means physically leaving house and home, spouse and child, and refraining from the above-mentioned activities. In fact, the only true perfection is true fear of God and true faith in God. For the gospel teaches an internal, eternal reality and righteousness of the heart, not an external, temporal one. The gospel does not overthrow secular government, public order, and marriage but instead intends that a person keep all this as a true order of God and demonstrate in these walks of life true Christian love and true good works according to each person's calling. Christians, therefore, are obliged to be subject to political authority and to obey its commands and laws in all that may be done without sin. But if a command of the political authority cannot be followed without sin, one must obey God rather than any human beings.

Luther approaches the same idea of worldly work being the instruments of God's love and care and provision in the Large Catechism, where he explains the First Article of the Apostles Creed to mean that the Creator's work is done through all kinds of ordinary human work (farmers, rulers, etc.) as well as through other (non-human) creatures (sun, moon, seasons, weather, etc.). To make a long story short, a proper confessional Lutheran view is that "secular" work is itself sacred because God commands it, blesses it, and uses it. We begin thinking well about work when we remember that sacredness; we forget it at our peril.

Some Lutherans take some pains to point out that, strictly speaking, non-Christians do not have vocations, though they can and do serve God's good purposes in the world unwittingly, in spite of themselves. This is perhaps a little like the fine distinction Erik Herrmann introduces between "grace" and "goodness"—and like that distinction, we probably should keep in mind that it is more useful as an internal tool in our theological system than as a means of communicating clearly with the rest of the world. While a distinction between "vocation" (the Christian thing) and "estate" (what other people have) may be true, at the moment I am not really interested in my subjective recognition that God has called me to be a husband to my wife, a father to my children, a teacher to my students, etc. Rather, I want to make the point that the Reformation doctrine of justification resulted in a new appreciation of "worldly" life per se as the arena of the Creator's generosity and care, and thus also the proper sphere of living out genuine faith and love. Christians should indeed be taught and reminded that they please God and serve the people around them in the ordinary tasks of daily life. But it is true whether they remember it or not.

Max Weber Had a Point

The historical and cultural developments since the Reformation have been profoundly shaped by this Protestant idea of the sacredness of secular work. Our contemporary society and our economic system bear the marks of the Reformation insight.

A century ago sociologist Max Weber argued that the Protestant "ethos" placed supreme moral value on work and vocation as the proper expression of service to God,

so that what he called a “Calvinistic worldly asceticism” displaced the other-worldliness of the dedicated religious life. To be fair, Weber was especially interested in the Puritan Calvinists, and one of his favorite examples was that famous “theologian” Benjamin Franklin, so he was clearly not talking about a deeply orthodox and theologically informed kind of Protestantism! His concern, after all, is the way Protestantism (and especially Calvinism and Puritanism) shape capitalist societies.

Briefly put, Weber argued that, while medieval monasticism led men and women away from worldly pursuits and the business of everyday life and commerce, the habits and morals of this worldly asceticism directed pious Protestants to intensified diligence and hard-working success in their worldly callings. “The only way of living acceptably to God,” according to Weber, “was not to surpass worldly morality in monastic asceticism, but solely through the fulfillment of the obligations imposed upon the individual by his position in the world. That was his calling.” This line of Calvinist-Puritan thought in turn shapes ideas about work, wealth, and religious duty. Describing the teaching of seventeenth-century English Puritan Richard Baxter, Weber said:

Wealth as such is a great danger; its temptations never end, and its pursuit is not only senseless . . . but it is morally suspect. . . . [But] the real moral objection is to relaxation in the security of possession, the enjoyment of wealth with the consequence of idleness and the temptations of the flesh, above all the distraction from the pursuit of a religious life. . . . For the saints’ everlasting rest is in the next world; on earth man must, to be certain of his state of grace, “do the works of him who sent him, as long as it is yet day.” Not leisure and enjoyment, but only activity serves to increase the glory of God. . . . Waste of time is thus the first and in principle the deadliest of sins. . . . Thus inactive contemplation is also valueless, or even directly reprehensible if is at the expense of one’s daily work. For it is less pleasing to God than the active performance of His will in a calling. . . . Unwillingness to work is symptomatic of the lack of grace.¹

I think Weber misunderstands Luther when he describes the reformer’s doctrine of vocation as merely a kind of resignation to divinely imposed limits and conditions. For example, he says that Luther conceived of vocation as “a fate to which he must submit and which he must make the best of.” Weber overlooks the positive view of all kinds of work in which Luther discerns the Creator’s providential hand.

Nevertheless, Weber had a point: the Puritan insistence on hard work and prosperity as signs of God’s grace have deeply shaped our culture, our politics, and our economy. The ethical principles attached to hard work are still very much at work in America today, though admittedly often in a less overtly religious form. We Americans highly value work, we respect those identified as hard workers, and we derive much (perhaps too much) of our identity and self-esteem from success in our careers. Unemployment is a psychological and even existential problem, as much as it is a financial one.

What Are People For?

The narrow Puritan focus on a “well-marked calling” redefined the Protestant idea of “vocation” in specifically economic terms, as gainful employment of one kind or another. As Weber understood this development, such work not only serves to increase the common good, but is seen as the most important way in which a Christian glorifies God and proves himself to be a true Christian.

One consequence of this (as Weber also points out) was Protestant hostility toward anything in life without a specific religious purpose. The worldly asceticism of the Puritans objected to getting too much sleep; allowed for sex within marriage so long as it was an expression of obedience to God’s command to be fruitful; frowned on sports; and warned against hanging around public houses. “Impulsive enjoyment of life, which leads away both from work in a calling and from religion, was as such the enemy of rational asceticism.” Weber connected this ascetic impulse to the economic success of Protestant culture:

This worldly Protestant asceticism . . . acted powerfully against the spontaneous enjoyment of possessions; it restricted consumption, especially of luxuries. . . .When the limitation of consumption is combined with this release of acquisitive activity, the inevitably practical result is obvious: accumulation of capital through ascetic compulsion to save.²

The logic of Weber’s analysis seems to drive inescapably from the Protestant Reformation to a view of the human creature as *homo economicus*, man as merely (or at least primarily) an economic unit whose value is properly measured in terms of production or consumption, or both. That logic has largely worked its way through our culture, shaping the way Americans (whether Christians or not) think of work.

Our government, it turns out, is very interested in us both as “workers” (units of production) and as “consumers” and considers our vigorous activity in both roles to be a kind of patriotic duty. The Bureau of Labor Statistics uses its \$600 million annual budget to track the total size of the country’s “labor force” and keep a very attentive finger on the pulse of the US “job market.” That labor force, of course, does not include nearly *all* of us: it is the portion of the population of adult age who are considered eligible to be “workers.” If you’re too young, too old, too sick, or just tired of looking for work and no longer eligible for government “unemployment benefits” (which is frankly a strange phrase), then you do not get counted as part of the labor force. The “unemployment rate” is the portion of that labor force that is currently not employed. Strange things happen with these numbers. As a proportion of the total population, the labor force (the part of the population who could be counted as workers) seems to be shrinking of late; it is unclear whether some kind of long-term economic cycle is at work here. Yet the unemployment rate is also going down (slowly) after a nasty spike in 2009. In other words, more and more of our fellow citizens are not working, but their *lack* of work does not “count” according to the government’s standards.

My point in touching on this kind of statistic (which we hear mentioned almost every day in the news) is that the governmental, statistical way of accounting for “work” has become deeply engrained in us. Our understanding of “vocation” is usually reduced

to work, and it is an easy slip of the mind from “work” to “gainful employment.” We Christians also tend to do this even though, if we are pressed, we know that vocation is more than what we do for money, and includes all the duties and responsibilities that are ours as part of the Creator’s pattern of providing for human life and caring for the world. We know the rich story of the Creator’s care and we can appreciate the depth of the idea of “vocation,” but we may frequently just accept the bureaucratic designation and consider ourselves “workers.”

Other agencies track other measurable statistics that view us as “consumers” rather than workers. Our friends at the Bureau of Labor Statistics collect mountains of data to calculate the “consumer price index” every month. (It was down by 0.2 percent in August [2014]—hope you enjoyed that.) And the non-governmental Conference Board keeps track of something called “consumer confidence.” (It’s up slightly; thanks for asking.) The duty of us all, when the country is faced with an economic crisis, is to *consume* as much as possible, and more. Buy, borrow, spend, and go shopping: it is your duty as a consumer-citizen. The Cars Allowance Rebate System (a.k.a. the “cash for clunkers” program) was not only about getting older, less efficient cars off the road, but was also intended as a stimulus for consumers to “trade up,” get rid of their older (but perhaps *paid for*) models, and buy something—anything!—new.

Gradually but discernably, our identity has become defined by our function and utility in the economy as *workers* and *consumers*—and the latter is more important than the former, since our economy, we are told, is “consumer-driven.” As far as I understand that notion, it means that whether you produce or do anything worthwhile or not, for goodness’s sake don’t stop *buying* stuff. In terms of this kind of economics, being a worker is important mainly because getting paid means you can buy more things.

Any economy or economic theory is rooted in an idea of what people are *for*, a conception of how we value human activity. Viewing people as only workers and consumers is a serious reduction and limitation of our view of human life and dignity. And it has serious repercussions, about which we will say more below. But now we must turn our thoughts to “rest.”

Rest

We do not work all the time. Even for the most pious Puritan or the most addicted workaholic, rest is also a common human need and experience, and an experience about which the Christian story has something to offer.

Sabbath and the Spiritualization of Rest

The Old Testament, of course, commands the observance of the Sabbath as a day of rest, distinct from the rest of the week and set aside to remember and enjoy the Creator. Especially in the Reformed tradition, a more or less literal application of this commandment shaped the practice and expectations in society, even in civil law.³

Luther’s take on the Sabbath commandment, of course, was significantly different and did not insist on such civil consequences. In the Large Catechism he explained the Third Commandment in this way:

As far as outward observance is concerned, the commandment was given to the Jews alone. They were to refrain from hard work and to rest, so that both human beings and animals might be refreshed and not be exhausted by constant labor. . . . Therefore, according to its outward meaning, this commandment does not concern us Christians. It is an entirely external matter, like other regulations of the Old Testament associated with particular customs, persons, times, and places, from all of which we are now set free through Christ. But to give a Christian interpretation to the simple people of what God requires of us in this commandment, note that we do not observe holy days for the sake of intelligent and well-informed Christians, for they have no need of them. We observe them, first, because our bodies need them. Nature teaches and demands that the common people—menservants and maidservants who have gone about their work and trade all week long—should also retire for a day to rest and be refreshed. Second, and most important, we observe them so that people will have time and opportunity on such days of rest, which otherwise would not be available, to attend worship services, that is, so that they may assemble to hear and discuss God’s Word and then to offer praise, song, and prayer to God.

For his sixteenth-century German audience, Luther explained that the civil prohibition of work on one particular day was now abrogated and the literal meaning of the commandment no longer applied to Christians. Rather, Luther taught that the spiritual meaning still instructed God’s people to pay close attention to the word of God. The New Testament Sabbath, according to this explanation, is about setting aside time to hear and learn God’s word, not about the work or business a person may or may not conduct on a given day.

In this way, not only the specific commandment of the Sabbath but also the more general concept of “rest” was spiritualized. At the same time, physical rest was *instrumentalized* and valued only insofar as it served to promote and enable our *real* service to God in our work and vocation. In other words, literal, physical rest was not necessarily good in itself—and the Christian’s real rest would be in the hereafter—but it was permissible as long as it served to make us more fit for work.

Rest as Health

Puritans saw bodily rest as a concession to human weakness and involving its own temptations to idleness and luxury; rest was acceptable when needed, but not to be overindulged. The contemporary world tends to view rest as an ingredient in physical and psychological health and wellness, rather than a matter of moral character or spiritual discipline. In other words, rest in our culture has become primarily a matter of self-concern, instrumentalized again but this time in service to a worldly end rather than ultimate spiritual salvation.

There are enough reasons in this world to make rest a necessity, for in this bent and broken world we (and I mean, we *people*, all of us) are often enough weary with

toil and sorrow. And I wholeheartedly agree with Luther about the need for individuals and communities to set aside regular time to hear and discuss God's word and give him praise. Yet it is a mistake to reduce rest to a necessary instrument in support of our work, or to a spiritual discipline in pursuit of our salvation. Laughter, and perhaps even a degree of folly, lie at the heart of rest, and the sheer goodness of these things is self-evident, whether we can fit them neatly into our dogmatics or not: the amiable companionship of simply being with people we love, the exquisite pleasure of a joke well told, the indulgent inertia of sleeping late, the little delight of a cigar with a perfect draw. We must not make it too serious a matter, this rest of ours, because earnestness desecrates pleasure. When we speak of rest as "health" we mean that the well-being and flourishing of human creatures includes and embraces such quietness, levity, laughter, affection, and even plain idleness as part of our sanity and wholeness.

Leisure as Consumption

Enough about rest. Someone, somehow, discovered that there is little money to be made from my enjoyment of rest for its own sake. Because human beings have been reduced to more or less to economic units, *leisure* in the contemporary world (and in the American economy) has been classified on the consumption side of the ledger. When we are not "producing" (that is, at work), we are supposed to be "consuming" through a bewildering variety of entertainments, sports, recreations, diversions, and pastimes. Wendell Berry calls these the "pleasure industries," to which we turn for some diversion, or consolation, when we are alienated and defeated by our work.

The industrialization of leisure is everywhere around us, and we are besieged and numbed by myriad forms of entertainment. Television, games, idle gossip, the whole Pandora's box of the World Wide Web—and that is just on the phones in our pockets. In our society and economy, huge amounts of wealth change hands in the relentless, energetic pursuit of leisure: theme parks, jet-skis, casinos, professional sports, and on and on. No government office or think tank keeps statistics on this, as far as I am aware, but I suspect that most Americans spend more time and money on—and more to the point, direct their *hearts* toward—the consumption of what is offered by the industries of leisure and entertainment, than we enjoy the simpler (and cheaper) pleasures of rest.

It is a sly deception to substitute the consumption of leisure for the plain health and sanity of rest, but that does not stop me from participating as a leisure consumer. Let me just point to one readily recognizable and nearly ubiquitous example of the industrialization of leisure: electronics. From big-screen TV's, to blue-ray players, to cable and TiVo and HD sports, to X-Box/Playstation/Minecraft/Warcraft/Halo, to Angry Birds and Farmville, to Facebook/Twitter/Instagram, to BuzzFeed, to Netflix . . . Well, perhaps you get the idea. Because our various electronic gadgets are designed both to plug us incessantly into "work" and also to put all kinds of industrialized leisure at our fingertips, they have become the insidious enemies of real rest. This is not just my rant: there have been medical studies that measure the ways in which our use of electronics interferes with sleep patterns and increases stress.

Play

Human beings are not mere economic units, and cannot be reduced to some combination of production and consumption. Similarly, not everything in life is easily labeled as “work” or “rest.” There is, in fact, a whole spectrum of human activity that lies between the labor of our livelihood (work) and passive relaxation (rest), and yet cannot properly be categorized as leisure consumption, either.

Why Do We Play?

The Puritans, according to Max Weber at least, waged a relentless campaign against “the impulsive enjoyment of life” and of possessions. In that sense, of course, Puritanism seems to have decisively lost the culture war: it is hard to imagine a society more dedicated to the “impulsive enjoyment of life” than our own. The industrialized hedonism of contemporary America is a far cry from Weber’s Protestant ethic, but the spirit of capitalism is alive and well in our quickness to monetize our pleasures. Yet persistently and quietly, we humans keep inventing ways to reconnect work and pleasure. I will use “play” as a term that describes those efforts.

Love’s Labors Lost?

What I have in mind by the term “play” is not consumption of pleasures to compensate for our dehumanizing work. Perhaps such consumption can, to an extent, help us do our duty as consumers, but it does not satisfy—it is not intended to satisfy!—and leads us in a cycle of escalating, unfulfilled desires. In fundamental ways, we are pressed to divide our life between work and leisure, and that division introduces a deep rift between labor and love. What’s lost in our bifurcated world is too often the real, lived connection between work and enjoyment. According to the common myth of our culture, you are not supposed to enjoy your job: if it were fun they would not have to pay you to do it.

This rift between labor and love is partly the result of how our work, our gainful employment, our job is physically distant from our home. The places Americans work are largely devoid of simple enjoyment, and at the same time our homes are not sufficiently places of the meaningful, pleasant work that flows from love. One toxic consequence of the segregation of work and love, vocation and family, is that the family is also reduced to a unit of consumption.

“Play” is work we do for the sheer pleasure of it. It is not intended to be confused with idleness or mere pastimes or entertainment. Hobbies, avocations, and amateur pursuits often demand intense labor, practiced skill, and long hours or even years of accumulated knowledge. Play, in this sense, is the pursuit of something of intrinsic value for its own sake, without regard for other (extrinsic) rewards. Other words for this kind of self-selected activity are “avocation” or “hobby” or “amateur interest” or “creative expression.”

A couple of simple examples may illustrate this combination of labor and love, of work pursued for its own sake. If a carpenter is someone who earns his living from making things with wood, then I am not a carpenter. But like many people I have

occasionally made things for pleasure, and because I needed them: bookshelves, mostly. When my son was about two years old, I made a little chair for him, scaled to his size, and built without any power tools (because I had none). I remember with pleasure the time and care I took to design, to build, and to finish that chair (which I still have). Recently I noticed that little plastic chairs about that size can be bought for a few dollars in Walmart, but a purely monetary comparison between my little wooden chair and these mass-produced plastic ones seems completely meaningless. It is equally nonsensical to compute in terms merely of dollars and cents the benefits of my home-grown tomatoes, yet any home gardener will understand the self-evident pleasure that is linked with the labor of digging, tending, weeding, watering, and harvesting.

In much of human experience today, our work is not where we expect to find pleasure, and our home is perhaps idealized as only a place of leisure (and especially promoted as a place to consume the products of the leisure industry). Why is there such a distance between our work and our affection, asks Wendell Berry—to which we might also add the divide between work and pleasure, and family, and love?

More and more, we take for granted that work must be destitute of pleasure. More and more, we assume that if we want to be pleased we must wait until evening, or the weekend, or vacation, or retirement. More and more, our farms and forests resemble factories and offices, which in turn more and more resemble prisons—why else should we be so eager to escape them? . . . In the right sort of economy, our pleasure would not be merely an addition or by-product or reward; it would be both an empowerment of our work and its indispensable measure. . . . In order to have leisure and pleasure, we have mechanized and automated and computerized our work. But what does this do but divide us even more from our work and our products—and, in the process, from one another and the world?⁴

Berry goes on: “We are defeated at work because our work gives us no pleasure. We are defeated at home because we have no pleasant work there. We turn to the pleasure industries for relief from our defeat, and are again defeated, for the pleasure industries can thrive and grow only upon our dissatisfaction with them.” In other words, the meaning (and purpose and respect and status) of work is too often alien to our home and family. And the love and pleasure of home is too often far from our work and livelihood.

The famous amenities at Google’s corporate headquarters strike me as the exception that proves this rule. According to Wikipedia, “Facilities include free laundry rooms (Buildings 40, 42, and CL3), two small swimming pools, multiple sand volleyball courts, and eighteen cafeterias with diverse menus. Google has also installed replicas of SpaceShipOne and a dinosaur skeleton.”⁵ Personally I wish I had one of their sleep pods for those much-needed afternoon naps.

The reason we smile at such descriptions is that the common experience of work is usually so different, and largely divorced from pleasure. Pastors, it should be noted, by and large have a number of privileges in this regard. We mostly have the pleasure of at least not working in a cubicle, and of not having our work measured strictly accord-

ing to some quantity of time or output. It is much less common now, but it was not so long ago that many pastors lived in a parsonage within easy walking distance of the church they served. In this way they were much like their people: farmers who lived on the land they worked, or shopkeepers who lived above their stores. Be that as it may, we must remember that the physical distance (and also the conceptual segregation) between leisure/pleasure/affection and work is much greater now for almost all people in our country, including pastors. So great and pervasive has this separation become that most of us simply take the physical distance and the compartmentalization for granted. But we should ponder: what does this mean?

Play, in the sense I use the term here, seeks to recover the pleasure, delight, and love involved in work as we do a thing for its own sake, because the thing itself is worth doing and thus worth doing well. In doing so we may buy tools and use materials, and we will take delight and pleasure in the work; but what I am suggesting (and what all of us long to experience) is not the same as consuming products from the pleasure industries. We take pleasure from the willing, loving work freely chosen by human beings, as freely as their Creator made the universe.

I do not seem to be able to get through a whole essay on any topic without quoting G. K. Chesterton. And on this point, too, he is instructive, both as to the dignity and sacredness of human work and as to its limits and scale.

God is that which can make something out of nothing. Man (it may truly be said) is that which can make something out of anything. In other words, while the joy of God be unlimited creation, the special joy of man is limited creation, the combination of creation with limits. Man's pleasure, therefore, is to possess conditions, but also to be partly possessed by them; to be half-controlled by the flute he plays or the field he digs. The excitement is to get the utmost out of given conditions; the conditions will stretch, but not indefinitely. A man can write an immortal sonnet on an old envelope, or hack a hero out of a lump of rock. But hacking a sonnet out of a rock would be a laborious business, and making a hero out of an envelope is almost out of the sphere of practical politics. This fruitful strife with limitations, when it concerns some airy entertainment of an educated class, goes by the name of Art. . . . Every man should have something that he can shape in his own image; as he is shaped in the image of heaven. Because he is not God, but only a graven image of God, his self-expression must deal with limits; properly with limits that are strict and even small.⁶

As God the Creator delights and takes pleasure in the things he has made, we have begun—like children at play imitating their parents' work—to take pleasure in creation, too, and to find delight as we work in it, and with it, and for it.

Conclusion: Workers, Consumers, and Other Humans

In common with all human beings, Christians work, and rest, and play. And at the same time, Christians have been let in on the *secret* that this rich, varied pattern of

human life is embraced in God's story of creation, redemption, resurrection, restoration, and re-creation.

Sometimes, of course, our actual experience of work is very far from what God intended. What made bucking bales for a dollar a ton "bad work"? If I am honest, I will admit that it was not the hard labor, the heat and sweat, or the lousy pay. I have, in the years since that summer, worked harder, and sweat more, for even less money—and I enjoyed it. What made that summer job bad was my complete lack of any connection to the work itself. It was not my field, it was not my hay, it was not even my truck. I was just a worker, and not a very good one, at that; my involvement in the work ended as soon as I got paid.

I think all people, Christians and non-Christians alike, seek a connection to the work they do. That connection comes, in the end, from affection, from love, from the sense that the thing is itself worth doing and therefore worth doing well. But the connection of work and pleasure is lost when we misunderstand what work is. The story of God at work in the world prompts us to restore that connection, because God himself delights in what he has made.

Dorothy Sayers, writing in the early years of World War II, argued that the whole future of civilization depended on carrying out what she called a "revolution in our ideas about work." I think she was right, but I fear the revolution is going badly so far. Sayers proposed that a proper Christian attitude toward work was absolutely vital, and at the same time quite revolutionary, because it would turn our whole economic system upside down.

The habit of thinking about work as something one does to make money is so ingrained in us that we can scarcely imagine what a revolutionary change it would be to think about it instead in terms of the work done. To do so would mean taking the attitude of mind we reserve for unpaid work—our hobbies, our leisure interests, the things we make and do for pleasure—and making *that* the standard of all our judgments about things and people. We should ask of an enterprise, not "will it pay?" but "is it good?"; of a man, not "what does he make?" but "what is his work worth?"; of goods, not "can we induce people to buy them?" but "are they useful things well made?"; of employment, not "how much a week?" but "will it exercise my faculties to the utmost?" And shareholders in—let us say—brewing companies, would astonish the directorate by arising at the shareholders' meetings and demanding to know, not merely, where the profits go or what dividends are to be paid, not even merely whether the workers' wages are sufficient and the conditions of labor satisfactory, but loudly, and with a proper sense of personal responsibility: "What goes into the beer?"⁷

Work, Sayers contended, "should, in fact, be thought of as a creative activity undertaken for the love of the work itself; and that man, made in God's image, should make things, as God makes them, for the sake of doing well a thing that is well worth doing." The alternative, which seems to be what our civilization has been busily build-

ing for decades, is a doomed and self-defeating economy of waste: “A society in which consumption has to be artificially stimulated in order to keep production going is a society founded on trash and waste, and such a society is a house built upon sand.”⁸

Faithful Christian witness in work starts with the value of the work itself, in its own right, not as a means to some other end or a pretense for some specifically “religious” agenda. Here is Sayers again: “It is the business of the Church to recognize that the secular vocation, as such, is sacred.” Sayers, of course, was unencumbered by our particular Lutheran usage of the vocabulary of *vocation* and *call*, but she helpfully subverts our cultural assumptions when she says, “Christian people, and particularly perhaps Christian clergy, must get it firmly into their heads that when a man or woman is called to do a particular job of secular work, that is as true a vocation as though he or she were called to specifically religious work.” Sayers grasps that the church has become as confused about work as the world around us.

In nothing has the Church so lost Her hold on reality as in her failure to understand and respect the secular vocation. She has allowed work and religion to become separate departments, and is astonished to find that, as a result, the secular work of the world is turned to purely selfish and destructive ends, and that the greater part of the world’s intelligent workers have become irreligious, or at least, uninterested in religion. But is it astonishing? How can one remain interested in a religion which seems to have no concern with nine-tenths of his life? The Church’s approach to an intelligent carpenter is usually confined to exhorting him not to be drunk and disorderly in his leisure hours, and to come to church on Sundays. What the Church *should* be telling him is this: that the very first demand that his religion makes upon him is that he should make good tables. Church by all means, and decent forms of amusement, certainly—but what use is all that if in the very center of his life and occupation he is insulting God with bad carpentry?⁹

Bad carpentry—or bad work of any kind—takes on a moral dimension in Sayers’s view, because she puts work at the heart of human life and meaning. The work we do matters, because our work participates in the Creator’s own work in the world. Sayers herself was an Anglican, and in some ways her ideas of ideas about economics and politics paralleled the Distributism of Roman Catholics such as G. K. Chesterton and Hilaire Belloc. But her view of work captures with vivid power the Lutheran doctrine of vocation and its connection to the doctrine of creation. Faithlessness or negligence in our work entails, at its heart, a failure in our relationship to God. Such a failure pervades too much work, and the church is not only susceptible to it but may actually indulge it with pious excuses, as Sayers saw clearly:

Yet in Her own buildings, in Her own ecclesiastical art and music, in Her hymns and prayers, in Her sermons and in Her little books of devotion, the Church will tolerate or permit a pious intention to excuse work so ugly, so

pretentious, so tawdry and twaddling, so insincere and insipid, so *bad* as to shock and horrify any decent draftsman. And why? Simply because She has lost all sense of the fact that the living and eternal truth is expressed in work only so far as that work is true in itself, to itself, to the standards of its own technique. She has forgotten that the secular vocation is sacred.¹⁰

Faithful witness values work, and also celebrates true rest, because it understands and embraces human life in creation. Such witness is deeply biblical, but in no sense sectarian or exclusively religious. Indeed, while it confronts a dehumanized economy that has taken hold in our time, it aligns us with a wide variety of people who also desire genuine human flourishing and oppose what threatens that. This puts Christians in precisely that relationship to the world around them that Erik Herrmann calls “reciprocity of witness” as we stand not over against but alongside other people. Together we try to re-integrate (but not exactly combine) our work and rest, our labor and our love, as creatures together with all other creatures. This vision of human life and flourishing would, if it caught on widely, subvert and revolutionize the entire American economy, and perhaps end the spirit of capitalism as we have come to know it. And yet this subversive vision of human work and rest is compelling because, while it does not demand or insist on the Christian account of the world, it is definitely enriched and deepened by God’s story, our story.

In this essay I have tried to suggest ways of thinking about human work, rest, and play that are faithful to our own theological tradition, and at the same time open to listening to and learning from the common experience of our fellow human creatures. We are left, not with neat answers, but with questions ringing in our ears, questions captured by Wendell Berry thus: “Where is our comfort but in the free, uninvolved, finally mysterious beauty and grace of this world that we did not make, that has no price? Where is our sanity but there? Where is our pleasure but in working and resting kindly in the presence of this world?”¹¹

Endnotes

¹ Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992), 103–105.

² *Ibid.*, 115–116.

³ Blue laws, or Sunday laws, which ban work or commerce on Sundays, were enacted in the United States as moral reform measures in the nineteenth century. Although primarily rooted in Calvinist or Arminian theology, they were frequently supported also by Lutherans—though notably not by the Missouri Synod. I remember when I was a teenager, seeing television commercials for a Jewish-owned furniture store in South Carolina, which always ended with the words, “Closed Saturdays for Sabbath observance; closed Sundays due to unjust blue laws.”

⁴ Wendell Berry, “Economy and Pleasure,” in *What Are People For?* (New York: North Point, 1990), 139–140.

⁵ “Googleplex,” *Wikipedia*, September 20, 2014, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Googleplex>.

⁶ G. K. Chesterton, *What’s Wrong with the World* (New York: Cosimo, 2007; originally published 1910), 34.

⁷ Dorothy L. Sayers, *Creed or Chaos?* (Manchester, NH: Sophia Institute Press, 1995), 70–71.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 64.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 76–77.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 107.

¹¹ Wendell Berry, “Economy and Pleasure,” 140.