

WORKING DISCIPLESHIP

Work in the faithplace

These additional study resources concern issues such as:

- ❖ Meaning in work
- ❖ Relationships in and at work
- ❖ Harmony in work
- ❖ Some Related Ethical overlap issues
 - o Justice
 - o Forgiveness
 - o Fragmentation/alienation – apparent or actual
- ❖ Hence – *God* in and at work <> redemptive creativity

My Father is still working and I also am working
[John 5.17]

Which leads in the scriptural record to *conflict*
[John 5.18]

Old Testament Origins – two traditions about work –

Blessing and Curse.

1. **EDEN:** There is an intrinsic harmony-enhancing quality to work that is God-given and an anticipation of his kingdom-purposes. In Genesis 1.26-8, man and woman have a relationship of dominion (not domination or exploitation) over the animal and plant world. The man [Genesis 2.15] is to work and care for the garden. To *till*, to *serve*, to *keep* have the implicit sense of *protect* in the original Hebrew wording. In this setting, *work* may demonstrate our participation in creation, expressing the truth of our dependency and the privilege of our stewardship.
2. **RHYTHM:** Work and rest give meaning and blessing to each other. The proportionate counter-balance of the Old Testament Sabbath is intended for enjoyment and holiness, after six days of work [Genesis 2.2-3; Exodus 20.8-11], reflecting the image of God in us also and our need for restoration. How can this humane rhythm of work/restoration be retrieved in the 21st century?
3. To develop this exploration some theological and historical notes may help:
 - o **The Old Testament Jewish Sabbath**, which falls on Saturday (Day Seven), is not historically a direct equivalent to the Christian festival of the Resurrection, (falling on Sunday, Day One). In the later (post-exilic) OT period, the practice of diligent Sabbath-observance became more and more a self-conscious identifying sign of and for God's Covenant people. However by the end of the first Christian century CE/AD, the first day of the week was celebrated as the Day of the Lord, and observance of the Sabbath was thus transferred to Sunday. [See Revelation 1.10; Acts 20.7; 1 Corinthians 16.2.]
 - o **Every Christian observance of Sunday commemorates Easter** (new creation) and since NT times Sunday was observed throughout Christendom as the day of rest from labour and the day for worship. This weekly break was a real gift (and need) for many generations of workers who had no rest-periods except the holy days of the church. But there were no detailed and restrictive hedging commandments surrounding this celebration like those that we find in Exodus, Leviticus and Numbers and can also see reflected in New Testament controversies about Sabbath-observances [e.g. Matthew 12.1-8].
 - o **The much later strict and rigorous application** of the Fourth Commandment (Exodus 20.8-11) to the Christian Sunday has been described as a 'peculiarly British phenomenon' and it is called *Sabbatarianism*. Certain literalistic models of the Authority of Scripture, particularly in relation to the Old Testament Jewish writings, can drive a need to incorporate all of the Ten Commandments into distinctively Christian ordinances. In the 16th and 17th centuries many

branches of Western Protestantism privileged scripture over Church and Christian tradition. (*Sola Scriptura* = 'Scripture Alone').

o **To illustrate the British 'case':** In 1618 the Anglican King (and lay theologian) James 1 published his *Book of Sports*, prohibiting work but allowing lawful recreations on Sunday and this book was later burnt by order of the Puritan and Republican Parliament in 1643. The Restoration of the Monarchy in 1660 saw a relaxation of Sabbatarian rigour (and much else!) but the flavour of the Puritan attitude has continued to haunt British culture (e.g. the Victorian Sunday) until, increasingly, throughout the second half of the 20th century, Sunday restrictions began to be more and more relaxed.

How far *is* the Fourth of the Ten Commandments, the injunction to keep the day of rest, directly relevant to Christian faith?

A basic principle of the need for proportional work, rest and recreation judges so much of our current British culture, in which some can find no meaningful work and others are scarcely allowed to stop working. The needs of the wholeness of humanity must not be denied. At least three key concerns appear:

o What might be the right use of Sunday as worship and recreation-day? If this tradition is vanishing rapidly (as seems probable for now) what needs to be put in place to safeguard the continuance of its positive and life-enhancing principles and qualities?

o More people are contractually obliged to work on Sunday and their rights to creative leisure (and worship) must be secured against exploitation. How can this be done?

o *Globally*, as we are now sharply aware, the inequity of working practices and the rewards of labour is vast. God's Kingdom-purposes of Justice and Peace, which are inseparable one from another, are clearly thwarted by this.

So, back to Genesis (the book of origins):

4. **WORK AS CURSE, TOIL AND SWEAT:** Work can be (is) often either spoiled or hateful. The Judgement-narrative in Genesis 3 presents work as affected by the disharmony that pervades creation following the disobedience. This shows between humans (especially between man and woman), in the pain of childbirth and in the struggle with the land (creative work now hard labour under the shadow of death [3.19; 4.12]). It is followed by the first murder (Cain and Abel: fratricide over acceptable offerings from labour [4.1-16]).

o Cain is not completely rejected by God. Could this be part of the never-abandoning God's steadfast love and purposes for humanity

between the Fall and the final healing/redemption of creation [Romans 8.22-5]?

o What might humans together be called to in the light of this perspective?

o What might be the meaning of the *Cross* in the places of work and shared toil, of (sometimes and often) rivalry, injustice and greed?

Observations for Consideration

- ❖ *We*, gathered humans, *are* the 'faithplace' at work – there can be no secular/sacred divide nor can we retreat to a church building as 'faithplace' in any sense of shutting-out and final withdrawal.
- ❖ There is no *one* place of faith. But *work* in all its diversity may/should be brought into and offered up in legitimated healing and restorative sacred space – church buildings etc.
- ❖ *Spirituality* as a term in much contemporary usage does not necessarily connote 'worship' or even 'religion'. It can be a private, individual concern.
- ❖ In this currently open context of fluid cultural discourse Christians argue for, and much better, live out, a corporate, social and *accountable* spirituality and they insist on the primacy of thanksgiving, worship, praise: *Jubilate* in all living. The novelist E.M. Forster [1879-1970] wrote that he sometimes wished that there were someone to thank. There is! We are the 'guests of existence' (Boris Pasternak [1890-1960]).

An early industrial chaplain (and later social theologian), Reinhold Niebuhr [1892-1971] prayed:

O God, who hast bound us together in this bundle of life, give us grace to understand how our lives depend upon the courage, the industry, the honesty, and the integrity of our fellow-men; that we may be mindful of their needs, grateful for their faithfulness, and faithful in our responsibilities to them; through Jesus Christ our Lord.

How far is this from where we all are and how much does it matter?