

Work and Rest **in Biblical Perspective**

Waldemar Janzen



Conference of Mennonites in Canada

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This is the fifth in a series of pamphlets produced by the Council on Faith and Life of the Conference of Mennonites in Canada. Previous pamphlets in the series can be purchased from the CMC Resource Centre (address above) at the following prices (plus mailing):

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Preface

Mennonites are known for their work ethic. That is good much of the time, but it can also become detrimental. For that reason, among others, we need to give attention to the blessings and the curses of work. The Bible has much to say about work. The very first chapters of Genesis introduce us to the importance of work, along with the related theme of rest. We are drawn to matters of work and rest not only because of their prominence in the Bible, but also because of the role these activities play in modern times. The theme of work and rest suggests a host of edifying topics as well as problematic issues for contemporary faith and life.

In the course of the last two years the Council on Faith and Life of the Conference of Mennonites in Canada has reflected from time to time on the blessings and the curses of work. This has included presentations and workshops at annual sessions of the Conference of Mennonites in Canada. We have come to see the theme of work (and rest) as an important spiritual matter.

We are fortunate to have a biblical scholar among us who has given concerted attention to this theme. Waldemar Janzen's knowledge of the Old and New Testaments, along with his sensitivity to contemporary issues, make a valuable contribution to the theme. We can be assured of the practicality of this piece, since it was honed in the context of numerous presentations in the CMC constituency.

The Council on Faith and Life offers this study pamphlet for personal reading and for group study. May the insights nurture your Christian pilgrimage.

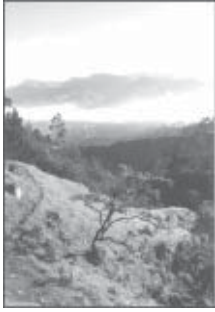
Helmut Harder, General Secretary
Conference of Mennonites in Canada
February, 1999

Introduction

The rhythm of work and rest is deeply embedded in our biological needs, in our social structures, and in the teaching of the Bible. Work is necessary to sustain life, but it also endows life with challenge and satisfaction. Rest is both essential for replenishing our capacity to work and desirable as a goal during the process of strenuous labour. Unbalanced patterns of working and resting in a society or in individual life diminish health and well-being. The imposition of such patterns on groups and individuals constitutes one of the gravest forms of social injustice. Both defy and pervert God's good intention for human existence.

There is much need to reflect on the social ills of our society related to work and leisure and to bring a Christian witness on these matters to governments and institutions. The focus of this pamphlet, however, is the smaller sphere of individual Christian life, the Christian family, and the local congregation. The pamphlet is meant to be an aid for reflecting, in these smaller contexts, on biblical-Christian teachings on this topic and to search for ways of living more faithfully with respect to them.

While Christians should engage in such reflection at all times, the need to do so has gained special urgency through the economic situation in Canada—reflecting that of many other countries as well—in recent years. Unemployment, lay-offs, downsizing, early retirement, unequal work opportunities, ambiguous attitudes to unpaid homemaking or volunteer work, but also over-employment, work stress, burn-out, etc., are subjects that fill our papers, our media, and our minds. It is my assumption and observation that many improvements with respect to these areas and concerns can be made in the smaller sphere of individual, family, and congregational life even before major societal reforms are implemented.—**Waldemar Janzen**



I. What the Bible says about work

What does the Bible have to say on work and rest? The answer is, first of all, “Very much!” Life is work, and the Bible speaks about life throughout. The New Testament alone refers to work some 200 times. We will have to limit ourselves to certain highlights. I have organized our survey of biblical teachings under four points.

1. God works and calls humans to work

In the creation story (Gen. 1:1—2:3), God is pictured as an artisan who works systematically from day to day through a six-day week. Then God looks at his work of creation, calls it “very good,” and rests on the seventh day. Throughout the Bible, work is characterized as basically good; as God’s good commission to his human creatures. In the creation story we read:

So God created humankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. (Gen. 1:27)

Much has been said and written about human beings as the image of God. Wherein does that image consist? In human reason? Self-awareness? The use of tools and fire?

The answer is given in the verses that follow immediately:

God blessed them (humans) and God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth. (Gen. 1:28)

In other words, to be God’s image means to multiply, fill the earth, rule and subdue it. To put it differently again, it is to be parents and workers.

The commission to “rule and subdue” the earth has often been misunderstood as the right to do with the earth, the environment, whatever humans choose to do, i.e., to exploit it through human use. The verbs “to rule” and “to subdue” are borrowed from language associated with kings; they sound at first harsh and cruel. They are deliberately speaking of the human commission as a royal, kingly task, to give it dignity. Every human is called by God, so to speak, to be a little king over the earth. But if we ask what kind of king, the answer is clear: A king in the image of God; someone who will take care of God’s creation with the love and concern for it that God models when he creates it carefully and calls it “very good.” Humans are to be God’s administrators of the earth, in the image of God, i.e. administering it in imitation of God, not in imitation of warrior kings who exploit and destroy.

Genesis 2:15 says it somewhat differently:

The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it. (NRSV)

This could be translated even more precisely as “to serve it and watch over it.” Human labour, therefore, is described as a loving and devoted caretaking of the earth, the God-given garden for human life.

But what of the “Fall” (Gen. 3)? Was not this high calling and commission lost? Do we not read that woman will bear children in pain and man will eke out a living from the land “by the sweat of your face,” fighting “thorns and thistles” as he does so?

It is true that the Fall diminishes the original blessing by placing a burden on the characteristic activities of woman and man (the Hebrew word *izzabon* is unfortunately translated differently as “pangs” for woman and “toil” for man, NRSV). Nevertheless, humans are still called God’s image after the Fall (5:1; 9:1-7). Childraising and working the land are considered blessings throughout the Old Testament, even if diminished through the impact of sin.

God’s promise to Abraham is the gift of descendants and land (Gen. 12:1-3, and often). His descendants will multiply and receive a good land that will sustain them, a new if less perfect Garden of Eden that they are to till and keep. Going out to work in a world that God has graciously ordered is praised in Psalm 104:23-24:

People go out to their work
and to their labor until the evening.
O Lord, how manifold are your works!
In wisdom you have made them all.

According to Isaiah 28:23-29, it is God who gives the farmer the wisdom to know farming methods and the proper times to use them.

In the book of Proverbs, diligent work finds much praise; for example, in Prov. 10:4:

A slack hand causes poverty,
but the hand of the diligent makes rich.

Surprisingly, it is the Book of Ecclesiastes, which we often associate with cynicism (“Vanity of vanities . . .,” 1:2) that contains the strongest encouragements to enjoy one’s work. For example, 3:22:

So I saw that there is nothing better than that all should enjoy their work, for that is their lot.

This positive attitude to work as a blessing and calling from God stands in sharp contrast to the ancient world. In Babylon, Assyria, Egypt, Greece, and Rome, work was looked down upon. It was considered fit for slaves, while the free citizen should ideally be free to pursue politics, philosophy, the arts, sports, and leisure.

The New Testament continues the Old Testament’s positive valuation of work. The words “work,” “to work” occur some 200 times in it, as we observed already. Jesus describes his ministry as work:

My Father is still working, and I also am working. (John 5:17)

His miracles and other activities are often called “works.” The disciples are urged to be co-workers:

We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming when no one can work. (John 9:4).

Their work is described by images from the world of daily work. Jesus calls fishermen to “fish for people”(Matt. 4:19; Mark 1:17). Elsewhere he compares them to farmers whose work is harvesting (John 4:31-38).

The Book of Acts and the Epistles continue this language. We read of the church in Antioch:

While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, “ Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.” (Acts 13:2)

The Apostle Paul repeatedly refers to his work. He frequently mentions his co-workers, and he calls the congregations he founded his workmanship.

Much of this language is applied to the special work of proclaiming the gospel. Almost boastfully, Paul says:

I worked harder than any of them (the other apostles),

although he adds immediately:

though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me. (1 Cor. 15:10)

But Paul also speaks very positively of what we might call ordinary work. There, too, he can sound quite proud:

You remember our labor and toil, brothers and sisters; we worked night and day, so that we might not burden any of you while we proclaimed to you the gospel of God. (1 Thess. 2:9; cf. 2 Thess 3:7-10)

By trade he was a tentmaker, an activity he pursued even on his missionary journeys (Acts 18:2-3, with Aquilla and Priscilla, fellow tentmakers).

Paul encourages others to do their daily work as unto God, even the slaves:

Slaves, obey your earthly masters in everything, not only while being watched and in order to please them, but wholeheartedly, fearing the Lord. 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; you serve the Lord Christ. (Col. 3:22-24).

We should note, however, that Paul includes all work under the theme of Christian calling. Nowhere does he, or any other New Testament writer for that matter, say that God calls anyone to a specific vocation, such as farming, or carpentry, or nursing. The Christian’s calling is more general, namely to serve God in whatever one’s work happens to be. (That some activities would have been disapproved of by the early Church as contrary to Christian ethics can be taken for granted).

Paul encourages honest work for a living:

Thieves must give up stealing; rather let them labor and work honestly with their own hands, so as to have something to share with the needy. (Eph. 4:28)

Note that the goal of work is not simply selfish; it is also, in the tradition of the Old Testament law and the prophets, “so as to have something to share with the

needy.” Many other New Testament passages emphasize “good works” on behalf of the needy; the Letter of James makes this a special emphasis. However, as we will note a little later, such “good works” should not be mistaken as earning one’s salvation. Salvation is a gift of God’s grace.

Furthermore, religious activities and the expectation of the Lord’s return in the near future must not lead people to idleness, as was apparently the case in the Thessalonian church. Paul admonishes the Thessalonian Christians

to aspire to live quietly, to mind your own affairs, and to work with your hands, as we directed you, so that you may behave properly toward outsiders and be dependent on no one. (1 Thess. 4:11-12; cf. 2 Thess. 3:11-12)

In fact, Paul becomes very impatient with loafers in Thessalonica; he says:

Now we command you, beloved, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, to keep away from believers who are living in idleness, and not according to the tradition that they received from us. For you yourselves know how you ought to imitate us; 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 labor we worked night and day, so that we might not burden any of you. This was not because we do not have that right, but to give you an example to imitate. For even when we were with you, we gave you this command: Anyone unwilling to work should not eat. (2 Thess. 3:6-10)

Several questions may well lead to further discussion, such as: 1. How does work specifically related to the spreading of the gospel, or church work as we call it, relate to general work? 2. How does God’s calling to work relate to our choice of specific vocations? 3. Does Paul’s teaching regarding spiritual gifts (Rom. 12:1-8; 1 Cor. 12) also include what we call talents, like musicality, manual skill, mathematical ability, etc.?

For now, however, I hope that we have seen that the Bible in both Testaments affirms work as a calling and blessing from God.

2. Work can become idolatrous

Work, God’s calling and blessing, can become idolatrous, however. The story of the Tower of Babel (Gen. 11:1-9) says it all: Humans can be so self-confident and proud that they—consciously or unconsciously—believe they can manage life and the world without God. They want to build a tower reaching to heaven; in other words, a monument to their own skill and ability, and a symbol of their independence from God. This attempt at independence sets humans up as supreme, as gods, and that is idolatrous.

In the New Testament, this idolatrous tendency takes on a different form. We know how the Pharisees tried to become acceptable to God through their own efforts at keeping the law. Jesus Christ and his followers, instead, proclaimed salvation by grace, through faith. The Apostle Paul especially warns tirelessly against “works,” or “works of the law,” i.e. against any human attempt to earn salvation by human effort. Salvation must be accepted as God’s free gift. Any good we then do flows out of gratefulness for this gift.

The work-righteousness just described is not idolatry in the sense that it rejects God, yet it shares with idolatry the human striving to overreach oneself;

to try to do by human strength and effort what only God can do. When we consider our own tendencies toward idolatry, we should not forget this.

3. Work can become oppressive

The Israelites were slaves in Egypt (Exod. 1; 5). Work was Pharaoh's means of oppression. We read in Exodus 2:23-24:

The Israelites groaned under their slavery and cried out.

But their outcry was not in vain. Our text continues:

Out of their slavery their cry for help rose up to God. God heard their groaning and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

So Israel's first great experience of God's salvation took the form of salvation from work, from the slavery of work. The whole first part of the Book of Exodus tells that story. It is the story of Israel's most central and basic experience with God; the story that defined God for Israel for all time. Exodus 20:2, the introduction to the Ten Commandments, summarizes it:

I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. (20:2)

Who is our God? Our God is a God who redeems from the oppression of work!

This central experience had many consequences for the life of later Israel. It expresses itself in the concern of many laws to protect the weak—the widow, the orphan, the stranger—for: “Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt” (e.g. Deut. 5:15).

In the New Testament, the oppressiveness of work is evidenced in the form of an ongoing concern for the physical welfare of the poor, the weak, and the sick. An oppressive counter-example can be seen in Jesus' story of the Rich Man and Lazarus (Luke 19:16-31).

The oppressiveness of work in another form is recognized and combatted especially by the Apostle Paul. It is the tyranny of work-righteousness, i.e., of the feeling that one must do good works in order to earn one's salvation. Through this burden of “works of the law,” says Paul, the law keeps us captive. It does not allow us to be free and happy children of God saved by grace. (Rom. 3:27-28; 4:1-6; Gal. 2:15-16; 3:1-14).

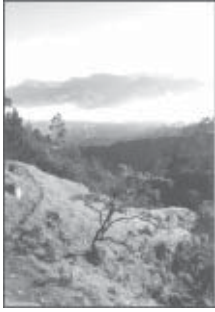
4. The sabbath is a bullwark against the idolatrous and the oppressive tendencies of work

Since we will consider the sabbath separately (see section IV) I will introduce it only briefly at this point. Israel was to set every seventh day apart for rest and for remembering God (Exod. 20:8-11; Deut. 5:12-15). The sabbath was to be a gift to Israel. It resisted the enslaving tendencies of work: You don't have to slave away all the time; you can take a break, as God the Creator did (Gen. 2:1-3). It was also a command that set limits to the idolatrous tendency of human work, the tendency to take over and manage: You must not work all the time, as if the running of the world were dependent on you; as if you were God.

For Israel and for Judaism, sabbath keeping meant the literal abstention

from work on the seventh day, and the special hallowing or setting apart of that day for remembering God. It found further extension into the Sabbath Year, every seventh year, when slaves were to be released, debts cancelled, and even the land left fallow so that it could rest (Exod. 21:2-6; Deut. 15:1-18; Lev. 25: 1-7). The sabbath principle was also extended to the Jubilee Year, a year of general restoration of land and property in order to set right such unbalanced property distribution as results generally over time.

We can also see the “sabbath principle,” as I like to call it, at work more generally. I mean by that the practice of a certain God-given rhythm of work and rest modeled by the sabbath. I think here of the fair treatment of oneself and others with respect to work. Jesus rested. He took some time out to go to lonely places, to pray and to rest. He admonished Martha, when she got too absorbed in the work of hosting, telling her that Mary had chosen the better part by listening to him (Luke 10:38-42). He called his disciples to a certain relaxedness about the morrow, the future; a relaxedness based on faith that God would provide (Matt. 6:25-34). He taught them to pray, “Give us this day our daily bread!” (Matt. 6:11), and not to hoard for the future, as the rich man did who built his barns bigger and bigger, only to die before he could enjoy his riches (Luke 12:16-21). In these and many other examples we see at work what I call the sabbath principle; that rhythm of work and rest which the sabbath represents most clearly.



II. Our work situations in biblical perspective

In our first section, we summarized the biblical teachings on work under four topics: First, *God works*. Work is God's commission to us who are in God's image. Sin has burdened our work, but not robbed it of blessing. Work may and must be balanced by sabbath rest.

Second, *work tends to become idolatrous*. It is fraught with the inherent temptation to take over, to make ourselves autonomous from God and try to manage the world, or at least our little part of it, without God; in other words, to set ourselves up as gods.

Third, *work can become oppressive*. The wish to master the world (second point) leads to the wish to master and control, or even to enslave, other human beings as well as the natural world, the environment. All of us may find ourselves in the role of the oppressor, the oppressed, or both.

Fourth, *the sabbath is God's gift to humanity*. Imitating God, we are called to balance our own work by rest, and also to set others free to rest from their work. To rest from our own work breaks the idolatrous striving for mastery. To let others rest sets a limit to our oppressive control of them.

Sketches from the modern Canadian work scene

In this section we will try to understand our own various work situations better and to see how they look in the light of the Bible. The aim is not to analyze the big scene, i.e. to look at the ills of our society and project reforms for it. Some trends on the modern Canadian work scene need to be analyzed, to be sure, but our focus will be on the small scene. We will try to gain greater clarity as to what we as individuals, families and congregations are experiencing.

Our present situation is often presented very negatively, and then projected against the background of a romantically glorified past. The present industrialized, technological, impersonal work scene is wistfully compared, for example, with an earlier farm and small town society where people worked together, where they found fulfillment in meaningful work on the farm or in their special skills, and where the machine had not yet come to dominate the worker. Such pictures contain some truth, but most of us would probably not want to plough with horses, to do the laundry by hand, or to cook on a woodstove.

We will try to assess our work situation, not with the yardstick of a romanticized past, but with the help of the first three of the topics from the Bible worked

out in section one of this booklet. The fourth one, the sabbath, will be considered later.

1. Is work still God's commission and blessing?

We still live by our work, and we want to do so, at least most of us. While we often labour “by the sweat of our face” and experience from day to day that our acre grows “thorns and thistles” (Gen. 3:18-19), figuratively speaking, there is a deep sense in most of us that work is good. When we complain, as we do so often, we usually do not complain that we have work at all; we complain about this or that aspect and condition of our particular workplace or activity, but not about the fact that we have work to go to.

The truth of this is emphasized by our society's great and legitimate concern over unemployment, but also by the difficulty with which many adjust to retirement, the sense of loss that goes with losing a job, the wish to work again when sick or handicapped, the frustration of young people when they find it hard to break into the job market, and much more.

This desire to work is not motivated only by the need to make a living. Social assistance, unemployment insurance, worker's compensation, but also the winning of a lottery or the receipt of a rich inheritance are, for most people in our society, not ideal substitutes for work. Many today work much harder and retire much later than would be necessary financially. Work is good not only because it achieves certain ends, but also because we are called to it as God's image, the image of a God who works.

The benefits—we might say blessings here—of work have been summarized in six points by psychologist Ronald Dyck, Alberta Department of Community and Occupational Health (slightly adapted here):

- a) Economic gain, or making a living. While this is not the only benefit of work, as we just noted, it is certainly still basic.
- b) Using mental and physical energy constructively. We have energy, and it feels good to put it to work.
- c) A sense of accomplishment and joy. Think of the last time you finished a job and saw that it was good!
- d) Provision of identity and status. I am a teacher, or a farmer, or a quiltmaker, or a computer programmer. I want to be known as a good teacher, farmer, cook, or whatever.
- e) Provision of a place in society. We hear constantly that the unemployed feel like social outcasts.
- f) Access to social relationships. My work establishes many relationships between me and other people. Without this people context, I would be so much poorer. (“On Work: A Psychological Perspective,” 1988; unpublished.)

Some items in this list pertain especially to gainful employment outside of the home. The satisfactions listed are in large part responses to the question: What does work bring for me? From a Christian perspective, we need to supplement this list with responses to the question: What does my work bring for others? Is someone else's life better because of what I do? Is God honoured

through me in the eyes of others? These questions can be answered positively, for example, if a patient in a nursing home makes it easier for the staff to care for him or her; where the nice flowers planted lovingly around the house bring joy to those passing by; where the raising of children contributes to a sense of security and the cultivation of positive goals in them.

2. Does work still tempt us to idolatry?

Idolatry, we recall, is setting ourselves up as gods. The tower builders of Babel did that by trying to erect a great monument for themselves in their own strength and ingenuity, leaving God out of the picture. They wanted to manage their own world, and do so in a big and impressive way. Is this still our temptation? And if so, how does it show itself? Here are some examples. Each of these begins with something that is not bad in itself, but each has the tendency to develop in an idolatrous direction.

a) Growth. Our capitalistic society is built on economic growth. Bigger is better, we say, and often that is true. But bigness tends to become a goal in its own right, like the tower of Babel. To achieve it through constant expansion, people and the environment are used and abused, rather than served. Ruthlessness of growth is one modern idolatrous tendency.

b) Competition. This striving for bigness, for takeover, is at least in part achieved through competition. It is important in our society to outdo and crowd out the next business or person. The ideal is, of course, that those who provide superior work or products will displace those offering inferior work or products. Then everyone in society will be better served. In practice, however, this ideal is often pushed aside by unrestrained lust for power and profit. The stronger dominate the weaker, and eventually they rule, like gods.

c) Advertising. One means of doing so is advertising. The ideal is to make good products or services known, for the benefit of those who need them. In practice, however, advertising will often attempt to control and shape the perceived needs and wants of the “consumer,” as we are then so degradingly called. The goal is no longer to meet the consumer’s legitimate needs, but to create new artificial needs. The consumer’s lifestyle, goals, and finances are managed, if possible, not toward the end of making him/her a better and happier person, but a greater spender, no matter what the consequences may be for him/her.

d) Technology. A loose definition of technology might be: the invention and use of devices that make it possible for humans to accomplish more than is possible without such devices while using up less human energy. Ideally, technology is our helper. The possibilities opened up to us through technology, however, become goals in themselves. We want to do more and more, not because the end results are good, but because we get a thrill from being able to achieve it. We subject more and more of the world to our ability to control and manage it.

e) Employment Control. Life is sustained by work. Certain work needs to be done in every society. Ideally, this work is shared by all in the community able to

do it. The complexity of our technological and financial structures, however, allows this picture to be distorted and managed. Access to the costly and technologically complex means of production is managed by a few at the top. Jobs can be moved from one community to another, or even one country to another, because of tax concessions and cheaper labour, leaving many people jobless. Jobs can be increased or decreased by financial policies governed by the motive of greatest profit for the shareholders, rather than consideration for either the workers or the consumers of the product. Seldom does unemployment result because all the work that needs to be done in a community has been done and more workpower is left over.

f) *Self-fulfillment*. This is a somewhat different form of idolatry from those discussed. The latter were largely corporate in nature, and market- or profit-driven. Self-fulfillment is identity-driven. Of course, we should develop and use our “gifts,” but the biblical notion of gifts always relates these to the upbuilding of community. Self-fulfillment as promoted so widely today begins with the notion that some work is more dignified and “self-fulfilling” than other work. That which is inventive, original, specialized, and artistic is considered creative and self-fulfilling. Generally, those forms of work that set a person apart from the community as a special individual are valued more highly, in this perspective, than those which many can and do perform. That such distinctive forms of work are called more “self-fulfilling” and “creative” is a very telling choice of words, words that emphasize precisely the idolatrous potential of this attitude. It is often a striving to be creative, like God the Creator, perhaps even replacing God the Creator? In any case, to be a little god who says, “Let there be..., and there was....” The term “self-fulfillment,” while usually heard as a positive word in our society, should alert the Christian to the fact that what we find self-fulfilling might well stand in idolatrous contrast to what fulfills God’s commission and our neighbour’s needs. Nowhere in the Bible are we called to be creative and self-fulfilling; the emphasis is always on serving and sustaining life.

In sum: growth, competition, advertising, technology, employment control, and self-fulfillment are some—and surely only some—features of the modern work-scene that illustrate the human tendency to take over control; control of other human beings and of the natural universe. Please note again that I am not rejecting all these features as inherently evil. They generally have an originally good purpose, but a purpose which can so easily be perverted towards idolatrous ends.

3. Does work still have the tendency to become oppressive?

Each of us could be either oppressor or oppressed. We could be, like Pharaoh (even if on a smaller scale), persons who oppress others by means of the work we demand of them. Or we could be, like the Israelites in Egypt, persons who groan under the slavery of our work. Many of us will probably find ourselves in both roles, simultaneously or alternating between one and the other.

In every society, much work needs to be done to sustain life. Work is good, as we noted on biblical grounds and also on the basis of the satisfactions it gives

us. And yet, our society has some harsh ways of imposing work. Let's consider a few examples. This will inevitably involve some duplication with the previous section, where we dealt with idolatrous tendencies. It is, after all, the idolatrous tendency to take over and control that leads to oppressive situations, where some are dominated and oppressed.

a) *Specialization*. The increasing demands of technology for highly specialized people tend towards a class structure: the highly specialized, who are almost consumed by the demands of their work, and the semi-skilled and unskilled, who are depersonalized and dulled by the tediousness of their work, if not unemployed. On the one side is the medical specialist or the corporate executive who works seven days a week and hardly sees his/her family; on the other side is the factory worker who punches the clock, churns out piece after piece, and waits for the workday to end so that he/she can begin to live.

b) *Family splintering*. Our work situation tears the family apart. Everyone goes off to different and unrelated work places. No one shares in what the other does. Often even mealtimes together disappear. If common mealtimes are arranged, it is sometimes hard to share other than superficially, because each family member lives in a distinct world for which the others have little understanding.

c) *Artificially-created goals*. The media hold up before us the supposedly good life that we should be able to afford; the houses we should live in, the cars we should drive, the clothes we should wear, the food we should eat, and the trips we should make. We serve this harsh master by working harder and harder to be able to afford more and more. Both spouses work outside the home to extend family income far beyond need. (Of course, there can be reasons for outside employment of both spouses other than the aspiration to achieve a media-dictated style of living). Purchases are made by borrowing, and then the debt forces further work.

d) *Status*. Our society measures our status according to our income; by "what we are worth." Of course, we want to be people with worth, so we "work our way up," to ever higher positions, appointments, offices and ranks. We slave away to get higher and higher, until we reach the level beyond which we find it impossible to advance. Then we feel defeated because we have reached our limits, while someone else can move even higher.

e) *Self-fulfillment*. The enslaving striving for status does not only take the form of seeking wealth and advancement. It befalls us also in the form of the need for what our society calls self-fulfillment. (We mentioned it earlier in connection with idolatry). It begins with the classification of some work as more worthwhile than other work. Innovative, inventive, specialized, or artistic activities—in other words, the kind of work that sets one apart from the community and makes one stand out somehow—are considered more self-fulfilling than the activities that large numbers of ordinary people can and do perform, such as farming, factory work, cooking, housework, looking after children, and so on. The enslaving notion that one needs to do something special and outstanding—even though that may be much less life-sustaining than the so-called ordinary

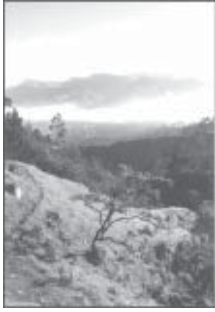
activities—drives some to leave their families, churches, and community commitments to do something that is supposedly more distinctive, creative, and self-fulfilling. In biblical perspective it is only more idolatrous, as we saw, and when we get addicted to self-fulfillment, it also becomes extremely oppressive.

These are some examples—and surely only some—of how our society tends to enslave us. But since we all are among those who make our society what it is, we share in creating and perpetuating its enslaving trends.

In smaller and more concrete ways, we act more directly as those who impose work on others. As a college teacher, I make my students work. I should make them work, otherwise I would be a poor teacher. As an employer, you make work demands on your employees. You have to do that, otherwise no goods or services can be provided. As parents, we require our children to do their homework and their household chores. We should do this, otherwise we would not prepare them adequately for life. As marriage partners, we have work expectations of our spouses, no matter how we distribute the work or define the roles; we expect that someone will go out and earn money, that someone will cook the meals, that someone will keep the car serviced, that someone will look after the children, and that someone will do the household accounting. We should expect a share of work from our spouse; we have pledged to be companions and helpers to each other.

In these and many other capacities, we become persons who impose work on others. That itself is not oppression. Work has been, and is being, imposed on us in similar ways. We are grateful for our parents who taught us to work. We are grateful for employers who hire us to work and who provide the structure and the facilities to do so. We appreciate our spouse's trust that we will be contributors to the upkeep of home and family.

The problem of oppression enters the picture when our own interests, or the interests of a project or a cause, override the well-being of the person of whom we expect work. Hardness, selfishness, and ruthlessness can enter subtly into all these situations and many others. When we exercise power without love in the work demands we make, we become little Pharaohs holding the whip over God's people.



III. Living more biblically

1. Introduction

In the previous section we characterized our modern Canadian work scene, both positively and negatively. We asked questions of it shaped by biblical emphases: How do we experience work as blessing? Where do we see the tendencies toward idolatry? Where do we perceive ourselves to be oppressors or oppressed through our work situation?

In this section we want to ask how we can enhance some of the blessings and remedy some of the problems of work by living more biblically in relation to our work and that of others. As I mentioned at the start of our second session, the focus will not be on devising sweeping social strategies for reforming our society. Instead, we will aim at the smaller circle of our own, our family's, and our congregation's situation. First, we will recall some biblical stories that can possibly act as prompts for us to think about our situations. Then we will think further, along biblical lines, about contemporary situations and possibilities.

“Biblical,” here and elsewhere in this pamphlet, should not be misunderstood as simple imitation of the very different social structures and circumstances of biblical times and situations. It refers, instead, to the teachings of the Bible according to the best understandings of the church as it tries to live in faithfulness to God.

2. Biblical stories

A number of biblical stories, or vignettes, somewhat randomly chosen and in no particular order, may stimulate our imagination as we think of living more biblically in relation to work.

1. Abraham's and Lot's shepherds quarrel over land. Abraham lets Lot choose his land, and Lot chooses the fertile valley, while Abraham accepts the barren hill country (Gen. 12-13). A competitive situation is resolved by Abraham's acceptance of a disadvantage to himself. He does so since he trusts in God's provision. Have we ever deliberately chosen to give up our advantages, our “rights” as we say today, to resolve competitiveness?

2. Jacob cheats Esau and manipulates Laban to gain advantages for himself. For a while, he seems to succeed, but in the end he is not happy, not truly blessed, until he returns his blessing, as it were, to his brother Esau (Gen. 25—33). Have we experienced that dishonest or overly clever business dealings leave us short of blessing in the end?

3. God gave the Israelites manna in the wilderness to still their hunger. Some gathered more than they needed, but it went bad (Exod. 16:16-21). Jesus taught us to pray: Give us this day our daily bread (Matt. 6:11; cf. 6:19-34). What about our tendency to hoard? Our concern for pensions and RRSP's? What is a good balance between responsible planning and a hoarding mentality?

4. A young Israelite girl was captured in war by the Syrians. She served as a slave in the household of General Naaman. The general contracted leprosy. When the slave girl heard of her master's sickness, she told about a prophet in Israel, Elisha, who might heal him. He listened, sought out Elisha, and was healed (2 Kings 5:1-19). Do you and I realize that our employers, bosses, supervisors, principals, and government leaders, are at the same time human beings who have needs, and for whom we carry a certain responsibility, and not only they for us? Or do we just grumble, complain, or fight them?

5. After years of hardship, Ruth accompanied Naomi, her mother-in-law, to Bethlehem, her dead husband's place of origin. She was a foreigner, destitute, and in need of work. She went to the fields to glean what the reapers had left over. Boaz, a righteous man, told his reapers to leave some extra grain on the ground for Ruth to glean (Ruth 2). Do we ever create work for those who need it, rather than economize as much as possible?

6. Jesus asks some of his followers to leave their daily work and follow him, in order to serve God in a new and unanticipated calling. Matthew (or Levi) leaves his tax collecting post and follows Jesus (Matt. 9:9). Peter and Andrew as well as James and John, two sets of brothers working in the family fishing enterprise, leave their nets and follow Jesus (Matt. 4:17-22). Many Mennonites have done this to go into MCC work or missions. Do you and I sometimes leave our routine to take up God's special work, even if not for life or for years? Maybe to become a Sunday School teacher or work in a committee on the evenings we used to go bowling?

7. Jesus tells of an employer who hired day workers; some early in the day, some later, and some even later. When it came to payday, all got the same. Those who had worked longer hours complained. They were jealous of those who got the same pay for less work (Matt. 20:1-16). Quite understandable. The point, however, is not unfairness in salaries; it is envy of the master's grace. Those hired early did get the fair wage agreed on. But those who had not found employment until the day was almost over also needed to live, so the master gave them what they needed. Of whom are we jealous when it comes to salaries or payouts? Do we think grudgingly of those who are (legitimately) on social assistance or unemployment insurance?

8. The Apostle Paul, busy as he was proclaiming the gospel, also worked as a tentmaker to help support his work. Our tradition of lay ministry was often hard on those chosen. We cannot continue it fully in its traditional form. But should we seek for ways, in some situations at least, where working at an earning job can be combined with work in the direct service of the gospel?

3. Modern stories

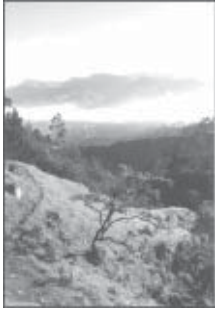
1. A school friend of mine became a successful medical doctor with an ever growing practice. Eventually he noticed that the practice held him and his family in its grip. He gave it up and accepted a moderately paid position in a small town. Can we resist the push towards career advancement, fame, and bigness when these become too oppressive?

2. A professor and his wife were both fully employed. They made more money than they needed. Since both were anxious to work in their respective fields, they both reduced their work load to less than fulltime. How do we handle situations of double fulltime employment? This is often discussed from the standpoint of how to manage the household and take care of the children. Do we also ask whether we really need the money, or whether we reduce other people's chances to find work because we are overemployed?

3. Some years ago I was waiting in a Winnipeg bus shelter. A bus shelter cleaner, no doubt one of the lowliest city employees, came to clean the shelter. When he was finished, he looked at his work critically and seemed satisfied. Suddenly he discovered a cigarette butt under a bench. He leaped towards it and picked it up. "Almost missed it," he said to me, and departed with a look of great satisfaction on his face. This man's attitude allowed him to take pride in his work and to find it rewarding. If we do not find our work rewarding, this may be partially due to negative aspects of our job we cannot change. But how much is due to our attitude? If this shelter cleaner could derive pride and satisfaction from his task, could our tasks provide more of these, too, if we worked on our attitude?

4. One summer most of our students found work, but for one young woman nothing seemed to turn up. She was intelligent, pleasant, willing to work, but she just could not find a job and was quite discouraged. I knew a Christian businessman who employed many people. He was not a close friend of mine, but I knew him well enough to think that I could call him and ask him whether he could not give this student a summer job. When I called, he seemed to feel honoured that I had thought of him, but he was really sorry that he just didn't have a job available right now. Did he not realize that I was not asking him whether he had a job available, but rather that he create one? What can we do to help others find a job, perhaps even by creating one?

We should continue to recall biblical stories and modern experiences that might challenge or inspire us with respect to specific work situations, problems, and possibilities.



IV. Retirement

Retirement, as discussed here, will be understood as giving up fulltime employment due to advancing age but without being incapacitated physically or mentally. Such retirement is a luxury enjoyed by many in our affluent society. In earlier ages, and even today in many countries, people had to work for a living until sickness or old age forced them to give up their work, either gradually or suddenly. We should remember at all times that there are many even in our society who cannot enjoy retirement, in the above sense, due to economic necessity.

Retirement is widely considered in our society to be a desirable termination of toil for those employed for pay. As a matter of fairness, therefore, we need to face the question how those not remuneratively employed might benefit from the lessening of work pressure and the enjoyment of greater leisure with advancing age. Many of these are women who have been fulltime homemakers and mothers through most of their adult years.

We want to approach our subject—retirement—with the help of the four biblical emphases noted earlier: 1. Work is a blessing from God, and an invitation to be partners with a God who works. 2. Work has a tendency to become idolatrous. 3. Work has a tendency to become oppressive. 4. Keeping the sabbath not only celebrates God’s creative activity, but counteracts the idolatrous and oppressive tendencies of work. For the purposes of this section, we will consider points 1 and 4 together.

1. Work as blessing, but balanced by sabbath rest

Is this still true in retirement? Here are some examples of the blessing of work that extends into retirement:

1. If we can retire, it means that we have had work. Are we thankful for that? When we look back on our years of work, not everything will be pleasant to remember, but we can glean a harvest of good memories.

2. If we can retire, it means that we can live life at a more leisurely pace. That may have its problems, as we will consider a little later, but it is also good, is it not? If we loved our work, we may miss it. Can we see our retirement, not as a time of uselessness and deprivation, but as the sabbath of life? Why should our working years not be followed by rest in this life already? (That eternal life with God can be seen as the ultimate sabbath is something that will occupy our

attention later). Can such a sabbath perspective on retirement help us to value it positively rather than negatively? God created the universe and rested on the seventh day; why not we?

3. For those remuneratively employed outside of the home, this sabbath of life that we call retirement is often initiated by the regulations or enticements of their place of employment. How can we insure that those not remuneratively employed can enjoy similar privileges? Can churches relieve some of their members—often women homemakers—of the expectations and pressures to serve meals or do other voluntary service for the church? (For others, of course, this may be the very challenge they need at this time of life). Can adult children be helped to understand that Grandma should not be expected to be their regular babysitter, even if she agrees when asked, since she does not feel free to refuse? Much attention and thought is needed here.

4. Retirement does not mean total inactivity. We still have time. We still have skills. We still have some energy and some opportunities to work. Are we thankful for these, even if they might at times seem more humble than our earlier professional duties? Isn't it time that we put forward some different qualities than those that gave us status and prestige; qualities like: "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control" ("the fruit of the Spirit," Gal. 5:22)? Are we thankful from day to day for all we can still do?

5. Retirement sets people free from their earlier tasks and patterns to try something new; not just to fill time, but to do things for others and ourselves that we have always pushed aside since we were so busy. Especially where adequate pensions or savings make earning less needful, we have an opportunity to practice and enjoy the blessing of freely rendered service. Creative activities and leisurely enjoyment—painting, reading, concert attendance, and writing our life story—may also be part of this blessing. They can now be received as gifts and practiced at leisure, rather than in search of self-fulfillment (see above).

2. Work has a tendency to become idolatrous

Does the idolatrous tendency extend into retirement?

1. It does, if we think that now, without our previous position, we are a nobody. We were accustomed to being needed and respected on the basis of our position and skill. Who are we now, when that life lies behind us? If we strive with all our means to carry on as we did, we resist God's order of life, according to which we are getting older and should step back, leaving the running of society to others. Is that not idolatrous, in a sense? God says, "You are aging!" But we say, "No, we can carry on indefinitely!" In this way we setting ourselves up against God.

2. If we were always in control of major and important things, like running a business or farm or school, is this our chance to do less "running" and practice some humble serving? It is wanting to be important and to run everything that has this idolatrous quality of pushing God aside and doing it ourselves. It will take much adjustment, patience and practice to learn how not to be in charge.

3. Another form of wanting to run and control things is the temptation of

older people to steer things their own way, and not to relinquish leadership to the next generation. This can mean telling the son who has taken over the farm just how he should run it. It can mean insisting in church that nothing new be introduced. As a result, younger people, who respect us and don't want to contradict us, simply leave quietly. It may mean attempting to exert our authority in many other contexts where it was once needed, but may now be little more than the gratification of our drive to control. I am not at all implying by this that we retired people should withdraw or fall silent. Our experience and advice are still very much needed, but they weigh more if sparingly given; and most, if given when asked.

3. Work has a tendency to become oppressive

Is this still true in retirement? It can be; here are some examples:

1. Our life's work becomes oppressive in retirement if it does not let us go. Have we ever thought of it that way? Maybe it is easier to understand this when we think of others rather than ourselves. There is neighbour X. He is over seventy, but still works as if he were fifty. Can't he let go? we ask. But perhaps it is the other way around: His work does not let him go; it is his master, and he is its slave.

2. Work may continue to be oppressive if its worries don't let us go. Those who were employed and carried the financial responsibility for a family had to bring home enough income to live, and also to save something for the future. Now neighbour X is retired. His children are independent. The house is paid for. He gets his government pensions (OAS and CPP) plus his own income from a pension plan and RRSPs. He and his wife can live well, but he lies awake worrying about how his investments are doing, or whether he could not find some part-time job. What were once realistic and justifiable thoughts have now become oppressive worries and strivings. Of course some people are in financial situations where they have to continue looking for income. I am certainly not criticizing them.

3. Our life's work or profession may keep holding us in an oppressive grip if it does not allow us to try anything new. Throughout my life I was a teacher. I saw my strength in being a teacher, and I hope that was right. But being a teacher was also my one-sidedness. It defined my life fairly narrowly, to the exclusion of many other things. Now I am freer to pursue other things. Perhaps I could do something quite new that my duties as a teacher never allowed me to do? Music? Well, in my case that would be going a bit far, but maybe not in yours. I am still searching, not to leave my teacher-activity behind totally, but for some new things that may now be possible, enjoyable, and needed. Will my former profession hold me hostage?

4. That leads me to a widely experienced category of oppression through work, namely the mentality that only being totally busy justifies life. In most places of employment, we hear our fellow workers sigh and groan about the work pressure and the deadlines, and we join the chorus. If someone would ever say on an ordinary workday, "Oh, today I am caught up, and I don't have too

much to do,” would we not wonder: “What’s wrong? Is he/she lazy? Or irresponsible? Or what?” Would that not endanger the person’s reputation? If this need to justify our existence through being busy carries over into retirement, we are being oppressed by our former work. It does not let us go, perhaps to enjoy a walk, or to start painting, or to read a novel, or to listen to music, or to join a service club, or to do more visiting. I hear many retired people say, “I am busier now than I ever was.” Well, if that is with enjoying the grandchildren (and I don’t just mean babysitting them), or cultivating your flower garden, or preparing for adult Sunday School class in a thorough way, good for you! But I am afraid it usually does not mean these things, but is a way of saying, “Don’t think I am lazy or useless now. Just look at how busy I am!” If it means that, I hear an oppressed person speaking protest, at least inwardly. I think that if God will blame us, most of us at least, for misusing our time, it won’t be for not having worked hard enough, but rather for having rushed by and not noticed the beauty of his world, or for having been too hasty with our prayers, or for not having played enough with our children.

5. So far, I have listed ways in which our former work can have an oppressive impact on our own retirement. It can also be oppressive of others, especially of spouses working in the home. If, by my own continued busy-ness, I force my wife to continue the busy pace that once was required of both of us, I am unfair to her. (Oh, yes, I know that retired husbands can be “under foot” at home. But, wives, if that is the case, try to solve the problem differently than to tell your husband to go back to work, as he used to do.)

6. Finally, a society or congregation with many well-situated retirees can be a difficult environment for those who, out of financial necessity, have to continue their employment. This is especially true when those comfortably retired flaunt their affluence or make travelling and golfing the centre of every conversation. Even the proud and innocently-meant boasting about the enjoyment of “well turned out” children and grandchildren may be hurtful to those who bear burdens in their family situation. Let us be sensitive when we engage in “retirement talk.”

4. Further thoughts

There are points, thoughts, experiences, and questions regarding retirement that do not fit neatly under the three biblical topics emphasized so far, but should also be considered in a Christian discussion of retirement. Here are some examples:

1. How does one prepare for retirement (other than financially)? Many say, “Develop a hobby.” That may be good. I tried for a while, but I couldn’t think of anything. Finally my wife said, “Don’t try too hard. Your hobby is people, and they will always be around.” She was right. I do not say this to discourage hobbies, but to suggest that if we try too hard, it becomes artificial and may not serve us well in retirement. Maybe working on our attitude towards approaching retirement will serve us better. One form of preparation is accepting our age, starting even in our younger years. Let’s try to live healthily, to stay fit, but not to sigh over the fact that we have turned 60, or 50, or 40. Aging is normal, good, and God-intended. Those who can accept each birthday as the celebration of the

gift of another year of life, rather than a time of mourning for another year “down the drain,” will also be better prepared to accept their later years.

2. One of my surprises has been how much there is to be learned in the financial realm before one retires. You may have learned it earlier. My finances were always very simple. I got a monthly salary. The Canada Pension Plan and the Conference Pension Plan kept some back each month to build up pension funds. Sometimes I could put a little money into RRSPs, but most years not, or very little. We owned no real estate other than our story-and-a-half house; no stocks and bonds; no farm. We had not received, nor expected to receive, any inheritance of any significant amount. All in all, I thought my financial situation was as straight-forward as possible, and I knew all I needed to know. Was I ever wrong! When retirement came nearer and I attended a Conference-sponsored workshop, I suddenly discovered how many options there are for arranging a pension income. It dawned on me that I had to learn quickly about LIFs and RIFs and LRAs and many other things. If you are like me, and a few years away from retirement, start learning now! And if you are married and accustomed to managing the family finances, take your spouse along now when you talk with financial consultants.

3. Don't wait with traveling and other projects too long, if they are really important to you. One hears story after story of people who “always wanted” to do something and travel somewhere once they would be retired, only to find that one spouse died early or became incapacitated. Disappointment, bitterness, and guilt feelings result. Even worse, this waiting for retirement as the beginning of the good life devalues earlier periods of life. Just as students should not view their school years merely as preparation for life, but as real life, people should not see their working years as mainly a preparation for the supposedly good life to follow during retirement. Financial and tourism advertisers bombard us with those images of elderly but amazingly fit-looking couples basking under palm trees by the seashore, enjoying their well-deserved retirement for which they have worked all their lives. From a Christian perspective, the whole notion of this secular and materialistic “teleology” (endtime expectation) misses both the purpose and the goal of life.

4. When should one retire? It is such an important question, but I cannot find any biblical guidance for it. One can offer generalities, like, “One should be a good steward of one's time, energy and abilities.” But this is hardly specific enough to be very helpful. I offer three responses to the question, When should one retire?

a) One should not retire while under sixty-five, in good health, and liking one's work, unless one has specific positive aims for the future, such as MCC work, or starting a specific new career or business. I know several people who retired too early and who became unhappy, even sick, until they found employment again.

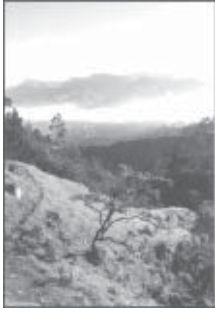
b) One should not wait too long. For whatever reason, sixty-five is the age in our society when others expect us to retire, whether it can be enforced legally or not. This is not the right age for everyone, but everyone should consider this

social expectation seriously some time before reaching that age, and in consultation with wise friends. The question of creating job opportunities for younger people is only one of several considerations, but an important one. A “rights mentality” on the age of retirement is as little helpful here as elsewhere, nor is it Christian.

c) In most cases it is good to set one’s retirement date a year or two in advance, if one has that choice. It eases one’s own mind, allows for preparation and transition, and helps employers to plan for replacement.

5. As we approach retirement or are in it, we ought to think of death, not morbidly or fancifully (what will heaven be like?), but realistically. Of course, we should think of our mortality throughout life, but this is the time to do it with greater realism. A positive way of thinking about death—apart from such matters as repentance, salvation, and hope, themes that should always be with us—is to review one’s life and to place it into a greater context. Every individual life, when seen in itself, is somehow unfinished or incomplete. Self-fulfillment (as discussed earlier) is not the goal of human life seen from a Christian perspective. The Bible text that reports the apparently premature death of Moses seems very instructive to me (Deut. 34). Moses was called by God to lead Israel out of Egypt and into the Promised Land. Why did God not let him finish the work? Why must he die in view of that land without entering it? The Bible offers several explanations, none of which alone is sufficient. The more comprehensive answer is that it was not the completeness (or self-fulfillment) of Moses’ life that was at issue, but the fulfillment of God’s greater plan. So it will be with you and me. If we can put aside our own notions of self-fulfillment and ask what we can still contribute to the ongoing movement of the kingdom of God, we think rightly about death. May we not shy away from these thoughts.

V. The sabbath



We have highlighted three biblical emphases: *God works*. Work is God's call and God's blessing for us, even though sin diminishes that blessing. *Work has an inherent tendency toward idolatry*. Like the builders of the Tower of Babel, we tend to use our work to glorify ourselves by erecting monuments for our own achievement, leaving God aside. *Work has an inherent tendency to become oppressive*. We can use work to enslave others, as Pharaoh enslaved the Israelites in Egypt, or we can find ourselves enslaved through work, as the Israelites in Egypt did.

Earlier we touched briefly on the biblical teaching on the sabbath. God himself rested from his work. God invites us to observe sabbath rest. This is a counter-thrust to the idolatrous tendency of work. At least for one day a week we sit back and trust God to run the world, resisting our tendency to take over and be in charge. It is also a counter-thrust to the oppressive tendency of work. We allow a break in our work-driven life, granting rest to others and also to ourselves.

When seen in this light, sabbath keeping, or observing the God-given rhythm of work and rest, is one of the most important features of the Christian life. What does it mean, then, to keep the sabbath?

1. Sabbath neglect

Do you keep the sabbath? Most Christians would hesitate to answer "Yes." The very word "sabbath" has at least three strikes against it in our time and in a Christian context.

1. It sounds so Jewish. We recall the pedantic way in which the Scribes and Pharisees kept the sabbath. Did they not always try to catch Jesus at sabbath breaking; for example, when he healed the sick on the sabbath? Did not Jesus say that the sabbath is made for people, and not people for the sabbath?

2. Sabbath keeping sounds like strict and joyless Calvinism. Many of our children and grandchildren, but possibly many other readers as well, must have read the Laura Ingalls Wilder books (e.g., *Little House on the Prairie*). In the volume *Little House in the Big Woods*, Laura's mother tells Laura how things were in Laura's grandfather's days:

When your Grandpa was a boy, Laura, Sunday did not begin on Sunday morning, as it does now. It began at sundown on Saturday night. Then everyone stopped every kind of work or play.

Supper was solemn. After supper, Grandpa's father read aloud a chapter of the Bible, while everyone sat straight and still in his chair. Then they all knelt down, and their father said a long prayer. When he said, 'Amen,' they got up from their knees and each took a candle and went to bed. They must go straight to bed, with no laughing, playing, or even talking.

Sunday morning they ate a cold breakfast, for nothing could be cooked on Sunday. (Harper Trophy Book edition, 1971, p. 87f.).

The story continues to describe how glum and boring Sunday was for the children. Of course, they tried to have fun anyway, and that got them into trouble. It involved a sled and a pig, but I cannot tell that story here. The whole chapter is worth reading. That was sabbath keeping for many people three or four generations ago. No wonder it is not too popular today.

3. Sabbath keeping sounds very sectarian to many people. It recalls the insistence of some Christians (e.g., Seventh Day Adventists) that we should observe Saturday as our day of rest and worship, not Sunday.

These are three counts against sabbath keeping in our time. Am I trying to revive any of the attitudes just described? Certainly not. All the three groups I referred to, however, have one very commendable quality in common: they all try to take God's sabbath commandment seriously and live by it, and in that they are ahead of most modern Western Christians.

2. What is sabbath keeping?

What, then, is true sabbath keeping, once we have removed the caricatures? The sabbath commandment is one of the Ten Commandments (Exod. 20:8-11 and Deut. 5:12-15). Many other references to the sabbath and to sabbath observance are found in both Testaments. Let us read the first part of the sabbath commandment from Exodus:

Remember the sabbath day and keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work. But the seventh day is a sabbath to the LORD your God; you shall not do any work— you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns. (Verses 8-10).

So far, the text is virtually identical in the Exodus version and the Deuteronomy version of the Ten Commandments.

Then follows the reason why Israel should keep the sabbath. At that point, the Exodus-text and the Deuteronomy-text become different in a significant way; we will consider each in turn.

Exodus

Exodus continues as follows:

For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day; therefore the LORD blessed the sabbath day and consecrated it. (Verse 11)

In other words, Israel was to keep the sabbath in imitation of God the Creator.

In Gen. 2:1-3 we read how God, having created the world in six days, like a systematic craftsman, step by step, saw that it was "very good" and rested from his work on the seventh day. That passage has a solemn but joyous, if not

outrightly festive mood. God did not need to rest because of tiredness. Rest here is sitting back in satisfaction at a job well done. Have we not had that feeling? Have you, as a farmer, looked over a field nicely ploughed and seeded with that satisfaction? Have you, students, worked on a major assignment, finally finished the essay, handed it to the teacher, and gone for a coke or a bike ride? Have you baked a pie, taken it from the oven, smiled at it with satisfaction, and allowed yourself a coffee break?

But then, accomplishment and satisfaction want to be celebrated in company, don't they? And now, God invites his human creatures, newly created, to rest in celebration with him. We are invited to co-celebrate with our Creator! Have we human beings deserved it? What have we accomplished? Some weeks we may be satisfied with our achievements and be ready to celebrate, but in other weeks our work didn't turn out so well. How can we celebrate?

If we think like that, we have missed the point. God does not invite us to celebrate our own achievements on the seventh day, but to co-celebrate God's work of creation with him. I have used the following illustration in class: Suppose a father goes to wash the car, and he takes his five-year-old son along. Both work for a long while. Father cleans the car, while the little boy smears it up, so that father has to work a bit harder to finish the job. Finally the car is clean, and father says to his boy, "Look how the car shines! We have really worked hard, haven't we? Now let's go and have our snack."

God invites us to co-celebrate God's creation with him, even after a week when we have little to show for it. If we celebrate a day of rest and worship every seven days in this perspective, we learn how to live by grace rather than by our own achievement. Do you also notice how practicing this co-celebration of God's work counteracts the tendency to become idolatrous in our own work, the tendency to manage and control, and leave God aside?

One footnote to this emphasis: I have stressed our invitation to be co-celebrators with God. Christians are much more likely to stress that we humans are co-creators with God, thinking of our gifts and our creativity. But the Bible never speaks of humans as God's co-creators. In fact, the verb "to create" (*bara* in the original Hebrew text, for example, in Gen. 1:1: "In the beginning God created...") is used only with God as the subject. God "creates," while human activity is never so described. God's creative work brings about something new and original, while human work, even that which we call "creative," can never be original in the same sense.

Deuteronomy

I pointed out earlier that the Exodus text and the Deuteronomy text agree in their basic statement of the sabbath commandment, but diverge from each other when they give the reason for keeping the sabbath. The Exodus text stresses God's invitation to be co-celebrators of God's creation. Let us hear what reason the Deuteronomy text gives:

so that your male and female slave may rest as well as you. Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the LORD your God brought you out from

there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm; therefore the LORD your God commanded you to keep the sabbath. (Deut. 5:14b-15)

Here the invitation is not to co-celebrate creation with God the Creator, but to participate in redemption with God the Redeemer. Israel had been enslaved by Pharaoh in Egypt. Harsh taskmasters and high production quotas were imposed on the people. As I read Exodus 5, I see an oppression system that reminds me of the Soviet Union in the Stalin-era, where countless people unwanted by the state were sent to Siberian labour camps to slave for the state or die. Out of their oppression, the Israelites cried to God. God heard their outcry and sent Moses to lead Israel to freedom through God's power. This redemption from the oppressive slavery of work became Israel's greatest experience of God. Now Israel knew that their God was a God who was on the side of the weak, who had compassion with the suffering and oppressed.

It is this God who asks his people, in the sabbath commandment according to Deuteronomy 5, to imitate his compassion by breaking the hard rhythm of work and giving rest to their households. It is significant that this text begins with the statement:

so that your male and female slave may rest as well as you.

The "you" addressed here is the head of the Israelite household. He himself, and perhaps his family, might well have taken some time off to rest, letting his lowly servants—Israelite "slaves" were not really slaves as we understand the term—continue to do the work. Instead, God's commandment asks him to make sure first that those who are most likely to be overlooked are given a break. The rest of the household, of course, should also be given rest. And that includes the head of the household himself, an important point to note in our time, where it is often the people in managerial and professional positions who drive themselves sick with their work.

In other words, the Deuteronomy version of the sabbath commandment says: Join God the Redeemer, becoming a co-redeemer with God. Do we sense how this emphasis counteracts the tendency of work to become oppressive? How it keeps us, if we are in control, from oppressing others by means of the work we demand, and how it sets us free from the oppressive hold of work on ourselves? Work, as we emphasized earlier, is God's blessing and gift, but to be that, its trend to be idolatrous and its trend to be oppressive must be kept in check. God has given us the sabbath towards this end.

3. How can we keep the sabbath?

So far I have referred to sabbath keeping without looking at the details. I merely stated at the beginning of this section that it should not be understood in a legalistic sense (see the three examples given above). The relationship of Old Testament laws to Christian conduct of life (ethics) is a complex one. It has been discussed in the church ever since the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15). That Gentile Christians are not under obligation to keep Jewish law with the literalism expected by strict Jews in Jesus' time and later has been upheld by almost all

branches of the Christian church. Here, too, I do not wish to promote a legalism that makes the sabbath a burden rather than a joy.

Nevertheless, to allow the pervasive biblical concern for the sabbath to evaporate into the vague admonition that Christians should make sure to rest from time to time will hardly do justice to the biblical importance of this theme. To preserve its effectiveness, sabbath keeping today needs concrete expression. Jesus never abrogated the sabbath, although he criticized its abuses. To preserve the biblical teaching, but without its later legalistic associations, I like to think of the “sabbath principle.” The “sabbath principle” of 6 plus 1 (six units of work plus one of rest) is not only biblical, but has proved itself in Jewish and Christian experience. In the Old Testament already it is extended beyond the sabbath to the Sabbath Year (e. g. Lev. 25:1-7) and the Jubilee Year (Lev. 25: 8-55). In our time, it has been applied, for example, to the concept of “sabbatical leave” from teaching or other work, even if the count is not always exactly 6 plus 1.

Further, simultaneous resting and worshipping by all Christians on one day, Sunday, has the added advantage of creating community within the church. I am firmly convinced that the blessing of work (and also rest and worship) would be enhanced for all of us if we could cultivate Sunday rest by deliberately reducing our work or abstaining from particular types of work. That some work needs to be done to maintain life should be taken for granted. It may require reflection in personal life, in the family, and in the congregation to discern the most helpful line between what one might do or not do on Sunday in observance of the God-ordained rhythm of work and rest. I am speaking here of Christian thought and practice; to what extent we should exert legislative power to enforce Sunday observance with respect to shopping and sports, for example, is a different question.

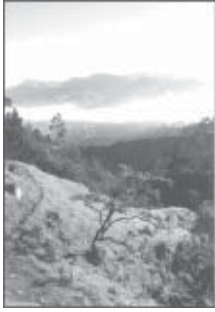
Christians should also be concerned with the danger that worship services and other church activities can be for our sabbath observance. Old Testament sabbath observance did not only mean abstention from work. It was to consist of keeping the sabbath holy (i.e. set apart) to the LORD. In ancient Israel, that included worship, and it should include worship for us. Nevertheless, rest from work forms the core of sabbath keeping, and a Sunday packed with Sunday School, worship service, potluck lunch, a church committee meeting, and perhaps an evening sacred concert could hardly represent sabbath rest.

On the other hand, sabbath keeping is not synonymous with the modern concept of leisure. The latter is associated with a passive doing nothing, or possibly with diversion or often tiring recreation activities. Biblical sabbath keeping, on the other hand, is a deliberate act of *doing* nothing unto the LORD, i.e. of stepping back, letting God rule the world, and celebrating God’s work.

5. Sabbath keeping as eschatological hope

The sabbath is also a reminder of the endtime. In one sense, God’s creative activity and God’s subsequent sabbath rest on the seventh day is properly associated with the beginning of the universe. And yet, God’s creative activity also is ongoing. In a sense, we are still in the midst of creation, including the

creation of human beings truly in the image of God. In this sense we still live in pre-sabbath times, looking forward to God's final sabbath and our co-celebration of creation and new creation with God. The writer to the Hebrews says: "So then, a sabbath rest still remains for the people of God" (Heb. 4:9; cf. 4:9-11). Whenever we observe the sabbath now—on Sunday, the day of Christ's resurrection—we are also training ourselves to recognize our place in God's leading of history towards God's own end and goal, which can be understood as the final sabbath.



Selected biblical passages

Work: blessing, idolatry, and oppression

by Waldemar Janzen

1. Work as Blessing

Gen. 1:27-28: So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. **1:28** God blessed them, and God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.”

Gen. 2:15: The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it.

Gen. 3:17-19: And to the man he said, “Because you have listened to the voice of your wife, and have eaten of the tree about which I commanded you, ‘You shall not eat of it,’ cursed is the ground because of you; in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life; **3:18** thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you; and you shall eat the plants of the field. **3:19** By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread until you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; you are dust, and to dust you shall return.”

Deut. 34:4-5: The LORD said to him, “This is the land of which I swore to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, saying, ‘I will give it to your descendants’; I have let you see it with your eyes, but you shall not cross over there.” **34:5** Then Moses, the servant of the LORD, died there in the land of Moab, at the Lord’s command.

Psalms 104:23-24: People go out to their work and to their labor until the evening. **104:24** O LORD, how manifold are your works! In wisdom you have made them all; the earth is full of your creatures.

Eccles. 2:24: There is nothing better for mortals than to eat and drink, and find enjoyment in their toil. This also, I saw, is from the hand of God.

John 5:17: But Jesus answered them, “My Father is still working, and I also am working.”

John 9:4: We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming when no one can work.

1 Cor. 15:10: But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me has not been in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them—though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me.

1 Thess. 2:9: You remember our labor and toil, brothers and sisters; we worked night and day, so that we might not burden any of you while we proclaimed to you the gospel of God.

Col. 3:23-24: Whatever your task, put yourselves into it, as done for the Lord and not for your masters,^{3:24} since you know that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward; you serve the Lord Christ.

1 Thess. 4:11-12: Aspire to live quietly, to mind your own affairs, and to work with your hands, as we directed you, **4:12** so that you may behave properly toward outsiders and be dependent on no one.

2. Idolatry

Gen. 11:3-4: And they said to one another, “Come, let us make bricks, and burn them thoroughly.” And they had brick for stone, and bitumen for mortar. **11:4** Then they said, “Come, let us build ourselves a city, and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves; otherwise we shall be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth.

3. Oppression

Exod. 2:23-25: After a long time the king of Egypt died. The Israelites groaned under their slavery, and cried out. Out of the slavery their cry for help rose up to God. **2:24** God heard their groaning, and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. **2:25** God looked upon the Israelites, and God took notice of them.

Exod. 20:2: I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.

4. Sabbath

Exod. 20:9-10: Six days you shall labor and do all your work. **20:10** But the seventh day is a sabbath to the LORD your God; you shall not do any work—you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns.

Questions for Discussion

1. Identifying your values about work. What “religious” value do you place on work? What do you think or believe about work? Is it good? Necessary? Or is it largely a distraction from, or irrelevant to your faith journey?

2. Exploring work in your life. How do you experience work? Does it feel more like a blessing or a burden for you? Does it give you a sense of opportunity for servanthood, or do you feel enslaved by it? Is it a privilege or necessity? Realistically, how often do you feel yourself to be in partnership with God, a coworker with God?

3. Discerning your vocation. What is your vocation? What is the main work of your life? What do you spend most of your best time and energy doing? How do these fit together for you?

4. Reflecting on spiritual dimensions to work.

Reflect on how your work (or reason for working) includes the goal or commitment of living generously? How does work that is specifically related to the spreading of the Gospel (or “church work” as we say) relate to general work? How does God’s calling to work relate to our choice of specific vocations? Does Paul’s teaching regarding spiritual gifts (Romans 12: 1-8; I Corinthians 12) also include what we call talents, like musicality, manual skill, mathematical ability, etc.?

5. Meaningfulness of your work. Waldemar Janzen points out that blessings of work include meaningfulness, but also that God’s emphasis on our calling to work is not that it be “creative” or “self-fulfilling,” but that it serve and sustain life. How do you work with that tension in your own life?

6. Influencing others with our attitudes to work. As either employee or employer, how do you contribute to the liberation, or oppression, of those around you? What are your work expectations of your colleagues? Your family members? What kinds of expectations or values relative to work do you portray to your friends in your casual conversations?

7. Ability to break from work. Is it hard for you to take a break, to really believe that God can continue to run the world without you?

8. Reflecting on the place of rest. What religious value do you place on rest? What does “keeping the Sabbath” mean to you? What place does it have in your life, if any? Does it beckon or repel you?

9. For those not yet in retirement. How do you feel when you think about retirement? Is it something you long for or fear? How are you preparing yourself for retirement? How does your faith affect this? How do you feel about your own aging? How do you feel about the aging of your loved ones? As you think about the change (decrease) in ability which generally accompanies aging, are you at peace? If not, what might help you journey toward healing or being at peace about this process within life?

10. For retiring or retired persons. How has retirement freed you up? What longings beckon you to refocus or reshape your retirement years? Into what new paths do you sense God leading you? How are you most tempted by the idolatry of work and work-related status? Is being always busy appealing for you? How might you come free of this pressure or oppression?

11. Improving work in your life. Reflect on your work situation. Use some of Waldemar Janzen’s questions to stimulate your thinking:

1. Have you ever deliberately chosen to give up your advantages, your “rights”, to resolve competitiveness?
2. Have you ever experienced that dishonest or overly-clever business dealings leave you short of blessing in the end?
3. What is a good balance between responsible planning and a hoarding mentality?
4. Do you see your employers and bosses, government leaders, etc. as human beings who have needs similar to yours? Do you sense a responsibility to contribute to their well-being, or do you find yourself more often complaining about or fighting against them?
5. Do you ever create work for persons who need it, even if it doesn’t help you economize?
6. Do you find time and freedom in leaving your daily routine to specially work for God (whether long-term, or to serve as a Sunday school teacher, committee member, etc.)?
7. Do you feel jealous of others’ wages or salaries? Do you think grudgingly about those who are legitimately on social assistance or unemployment insurance?
8. How can you combine earning a living with working in the direct service of the Gospel?
9. Are you free of, or bound by, our society’s push toward career advancement and enhancement?
10. Do you work as much as you do out of necessity or greed?
11. What aspects of your work bring you deepest satisfaction and inner peace?